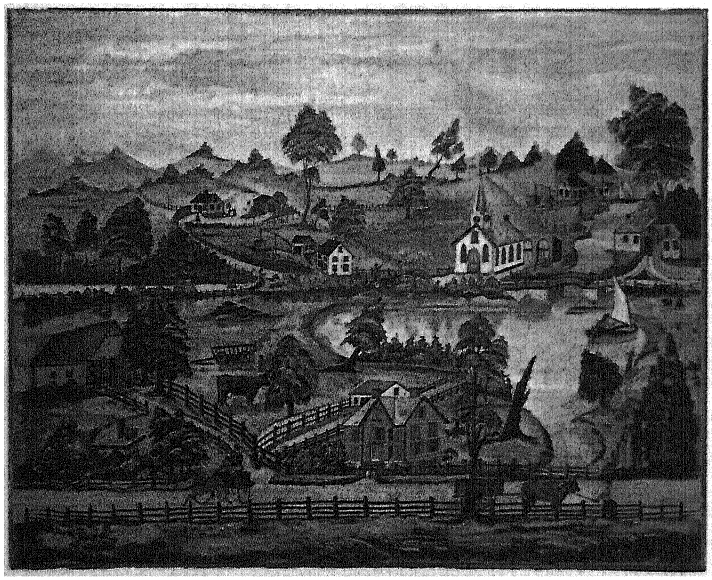
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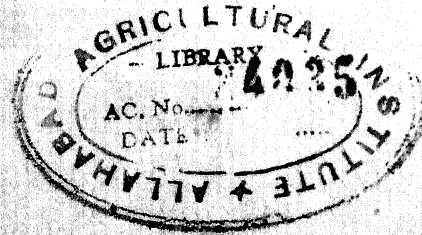
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PLEASANTVILLE, NEW YORK

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Printed in the United States of America

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LA BALSA

The Longest Raft Voyage in History

A CONDENSATION OF THE BOOK BY

Vital Alsar

WITH ENRIQUE HANK LOPEZ

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As their raft bobbed away from the coast of Ecuador, they were fully aware of the perils they faced. Along their 8600-mile route to Australia lay some of the worst weather in the world and treacherous reefs that could destroy them in a moment. They might succumb to starvation or thirst, or to attack by the sharks that would be with them all the way. And could four men—a Spaniard, a Frenchman, a Canadian and a Chilean—endure six months on a tiny floating prison without bitter, even fatal, quarrels?

Vital Alsar was convinced that the ancient South American Indians had made such voyages, and he was determined to prove it. His story of the epic journey is enlivened by humor—much of it provided by the "fifth crew member," an intrepid kitten named Minet—and by the colorful personalities of the men themselves. *La Balsa* ranks with *Kon-Tiki* as one of the great sea adventures of all time.

Survival depends on the total cooperation of all *men—whether their world is a raft, a village, a country, or a planet.*

–Vital Alsar

1

WE BEGAN our journey on one of those dark moonless nights that my superstitious grandmother would have called a "bad time for starting anything."

Two hours past midnight on May 29, 1970, as the tidal currents of the Río Guayas began to ebb, a small dumpy tugboat edged toward the dock to take *La Balsa* under tow. We had hoped to make the first stage of our voyage from Guayaquil, Ecuador, under sail. But after watching the river's unpredictable currents, we had sought the help of a local tugboat captain to guide us out to sea.

Even so, the 120-mile journey down the river and across the turbulent Gulf of Guayaquil would take almost three days, since we could be towed only at low speed. And from the moment the bowline snapped taut, the raft seemed to hold back, like a fighting bull clinging to its *querencia,* that special area of the bullring where it feels safe.

"The raft must know something we don't," said Gabriel. "It senses danger out there."

"No, it just doesn't like being towed," I replied. "Rafts like to ride with the winds and the currents, and they show how unhappy they are in these conditions. Anyway, we'll reach the ocean safely. That's where the real enemy is."

Actually there were many "enemies" lying in wait for us, some

of which we couldn't anticipate. We did know that the equatorial climate of the Pacific would be both blisteringly hot and chillingly cold, that there were untold numbers of treacherous reefs, that sharks would trail us almost daily, that we might fight among ourselves, be crushed by a ship on a fog-shrouded night, or die of starvation or thirst. But we never spoke of these possibilities.

That morning the sun rose behind us, revealing the tropical beauty of the Ecuador coast. The Gulf of Guayaquil was rougher than we had expected. In the excitement of the previous night I had been almost unaware of the raft's motion. My attention was focused on the last-minute stashing away of supplies and equipment. Now I became aware of the jerky, lurching movements of the raft, and the splashing of waves across the bow.

My stomach felt it first, a faint queasiness, like serpents moiling inside me. Then I staggered to the stern and vomited. When I told Marc about the snakes in my gut, he laughed, and told me to go and lie down.

The following day, however, Marc, Gabriel, and Normand were also sick. That evening we tried to take our minds off our discomfort by playing poker. In the pale, quivering light of a lantern hanging from the low cabin ceiling, I studied my three companions.

The oldest was Marc Modena, a weather-beaten man of forty-four with a gentle sense of humor. We sometimes called him *Pépère* (Grandpa). His long angular nose and firm mouth appeared to be carved from granite, and his scraggly beard concealed a strong chin. Marc had sailed with me on the ill-fated raft, *Pacifica*, which sank near the Galápagos Islands in 1966, nearly costing us our lives. He lived with his wife and two daughters in Montreal, where he managed a restaurant: he was thus the ideal principal chef and supply master. He was also an experienced sailor, having been for five years a signalman in the French Navy.

Our youngest crew member was Normand Tetreault, twenty-six years old and a Canadian. Because of his thick, bushy light hair and beard, we called him *L'Homme du Bois* (Man of the Woods). Quiet and shy, although quick to smile, he found most conversation a chore. Frequently he had only one comment: "Oh boy," but he could say it in so many different ways that it became a new two-

word language. An industrial designer with a lifelong love of sailing, Normand had built his own oceangoing sloop and was studying celestial navigation when Marc asked him to join us.

The pessimist of our crew was Gabriel Salas, a twenty-seven-year-old Chilean geologist. Full of charm and quick intelligence, he had blue-gray eyes that brimmed with mischief. He had been hitchhiking around South America and happened to arrive in Guayaquil as we began building our raft. He immediately volunteered to help us, working as hard as anyone else. I knew, without his having to tell me, that he wanted to sail with us. But I thought he might be too much of a hippie—too unstable for the long haul. He wrote poetry in his spare time and frequently talked about political revolutions. I had reserved judgment on him, hoping to find out how serious he was, but finally I asked, "Will you come with us, Gabriel?"



Normand, Gabriel, and Marc, with Minet, the "fifth crew member."

He responded with a wild "Yippee!" Then he reached into the pocket of his trousers and took out a gold coin worth fifty dollars. "Take this," he said. "I know the rest of you have contributed a lot more, but it's all I have."

Curiously, all of us were about the same height and weight—around five feet ten or eleven inches, and from 160 to 170 pounds. Consequently we could sleep in equal spaces inside our twelve-by-seven-foot cabin, which was only four and a half feet high at its highest point.

At the end of the second day most of us were still seasick and miserable. Our progress would be smoother when we reached the open sea. As we approached that vast expanse, however, Gabriel was unable to mask his natural skepticism. Could we actually sail

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8600 miles, twice as far as Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki*? Although Heyerdahl's voyage had proved the seaworthiness of balsa rafts built to ancient Indian designs, there were still many people who thought we would fail. For beyond the Tahitian island where Heyerdahl had finally pulled his waterlogged raft ashore, we would face 4300 additional miles of some of the most treacherous seas in the world. Huge coral reefs, sometimes hundreds of miles long, would block our path like jagged petrified monsters half-submerged in angry waves.

Vice-Admiral Samuel Fernandez of the Mexican Navy had given me charts of the South Seas, but he had warned: "Many reefs, even some large ones, haven't been charted yet. And thousands of small ones are lying just below the surface, unseen traps that never get on a map." The vast stretch of water between Samoa and Australia would be especially hazardous for a craft without radar, and night sailing would be as chancy as Russian roulette. Hundreds of vessels had been torn apart in this region.

"You're crazy, Vital!" exclaimed an old Mexican friend. "How can you possibly avoid those reefs without a motor or radar?"

"That's why I'm going," I said. "To prove that a simple raft can be navigated on the most treacherous seas. All the way across the Pacific."

There was considerable method in our madness. I had spent countless days in the naval archives and libraries of Mexico, Ecuador, and Peru, poring through time-yellowed documents, copying sketches of balsa rafts which the Huancavilca Indians were still sailing when the Spaniards arrived in the New World, and studying the pre-Columbian Indians' amazing navigation techniques. Captain Bartolomé Ruiz, one of Pizarro's most skilled navigators, reported to the king of Spain that the Indians had developed safer and better ways of sailing the coastal waters of South America than anything he had seen in Europe. He particularly mentioned the special keel boards, or *guaras*, which gave the Huancavilcas such control of their balsa rafts that they actually maneuvered more effectively than the Spanish galleons.

The distinguished Argentine anthropologist Juan Moricz offers strong evidence of long voyages across the Pacific on these ancient

rafts. The Huancavilcas, he writes, thought of the ocean as "a forest of rivers," with predictable currents to and from the Polynesian islands. They also knew about "friendly and unfriendly" winds and the use of astronomy in navigation.

Unlike our friends, my wife, Denise, never tried to dissuade me from the voyage. Sometimes her mother would try to provoke an objection, asking such questions as: "Why must Vital desert his two children? Has he no concern for them? Doesn't he love you?"

Denise would simply shrug her shoulders. "We'll be all right, Mother. You don't understand Vital. He's got to prove whatever he's got to prove, and he won't rest until he does. Nor will I. So please don't interfere." But I knew that the prospect of becoming a young widow was never far from her mind.

Preoccupied by thoughts of my family, I hardly noticed that the Gulf of Guayaquil had been receding and the water had turned from a murky brown to a clear bright green. The Pacific stretched before us.

"We're here!" yelled Gabriel.

We all cupped handfuls of water and joyously splashed it on our faces. With a ceremonial blast of its foghorn the tugboat cast us adrift on the open sea. We felt a mixture of optimism and awe. We would be alone now on this giant body of water that would feed us, wash us, carry us toward our goal—or perhaps kill us at any moment. In our enthusiasm we almost forgot to thank the captain of the tugboat. He had cast off the heavy manila towline at his end, yelling that he was donating it to *La Balsa,* as he circled around us before heading back to port.

"The captain probably knows something he's not telling us," suggested Gabriel with a mock frown.

"Maybe it's the sharks," said Marc. He pointed to a couple of dorsal fins slicing through the water behind us.

"What monsters!" said Gabriel. "They must be ten feet long."

"You'd better get used to them," I said. "They'll be with us all the way."

Freed of the towline, our raft floated with remarkable ease. I was thankful for the care we had taken in selecting the balsa logs, and the hours we had put into the raft's construction.

OUR LOGGING EXPEDITION had begun weeks before in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, nearly two miles above sea level. Our Indian guides, following the precepts of their ancestors, had advised us never to cut down a balsa tree until there is a crescent moon, when the sap has drained from the trunk. Such sap-drained trees are called female, while the heavier sap-filled ones are male. So we had waited patiently for a waning moon, determined to find seven female trees that would resound with a hollow *thooong* when slapped with the heel of the hand.

It was a bright cool morning when we left Quito, crowded into a Land-Rover. When the dirt roads became too narrow, we left the car in a small village and proceeded on foot, with all our camping and woodcutting gear perched on the backs of three sturdy mules. As we made our way slowly down the mountainside, ultimately descending some ten thousand feet, I was dazzled by the dramatic landscape. Here the western slope of the Andean range dipped abruptly to the jungle far below, with paths that teetered on the edge of deep gorges. Progressing single file along the winding precipices, we hugged the walls for safety.

With each downward loop of the path the air grew warmer and damper. Clouds of rising vapor obscured the way ahead. It was like walking into a hothouse. As we neared the jungle floor, the soft clay banks of streams, lush with moss, yielded a bewildering array of ferns and giant plants with leaves like elephant ears. Lizards and snakes slithered in and out, vibrating the leaves behind them. The birds were highly visible in their brilliant plumage—and incredibly vocal.

"They apparently don't like Spaniards and Frenchmen," said Don Cesar Iglesias, our lumber expert, teasingly. "I've never heard them act like this before."

Our guides, who were native to the region, could locate as if by instinct the best balsa forests in Ecuador. Time and again, as we came upon a cluster of balsas, they would slap a tree trunk and listen. If it hadn't the precise hollowness they expected, one of them would mumble to Don Cesar, and he would translate.

"That trunk is too *macho*."

"*Macho?*" asked Normand.

Don Cesar winked. "Your friend Vital knows all about the *machos* and *hembras*," he said.

The old man was referring to my experimentation with male and female balsa wood after our unsuccessful *Pacifica* voyage. The logs of that raft had rotted away in mid-ocean. To avoid another such disaster, I had decided to learn more about balsa. After reading all the literature I could find, I had gone to the Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales in Mexico City to talk with experts. I had also spent many hours studying the intricate internal structure of balsa through a high-powered microscope, then floating numbered pieces of the wood in a tub of water to register the degree of buoyancy of each one. Consequently, when I met Don Cesar I was crammed full of information about balsa. Annoyed by my arrogance, he had decided to challenge me one night.

"Okay," he had said, placing seven pieces of balsa wood on a table. "Tell me which are the best ones to use on a raft."

Weighing each one in my hand and examining the exposed ends, I had said, "This one's too *macho* . . . this is in between . . . this is two-thirds female . . . this one *macho* . . . this a good female." Right down the line, with very little hesitation.

Don Cesar was obviously thinking about that incident now as we slogged through the jungle, searching for trees.

Finally we found a cluster of the right gender. Although the females were lighter than the sap-filled *machos*, the log cut from each tree trunk probably weighed a ton. Watching our helpers tug and strain, hauling the huge logs one by one to the riverbank, I felt a certain anxiety as to how well they would float.

My doubts vanished, however, as each log hit the water with a great splash, then quickly bobbed up onto the surface. Most trees will float, but balsas can be maneuvered almost like plastic ducks in a bathtub. With hardly any effort we lashed the logs together with liana vines. Then we loaded this temporary raft with bamboo for later use, and climbed on; it took the additional weight without losing any of its buoyancy.

We shoved off from the riverbank into the swirling current that would carry us some 125 miles downstream to our construction

site at Guayaquil. Our woodcutters stood on the shore, waving, and yelling "*Buena suerte!*" (Good luck!)

The next afternoon we reached the port city and began construction immediately. Unlashing our seven logs, we slowly rotated one and then another, to find the closest fit between their contours. Marc was in charge of this operation, and he handled the balsas with infinite care, searching for the best pairings.



Supervised by Don Cesar Iglesias, native workers strip bark from balsa logs in the Ecuadorian jungle (left). At Guayaquil the logs are rotated to find the best pairings (near right) before being taken ashore for shaping and grooving (far right).

"He's a born matchmaker," observed Normand.

"It will be a strange match," I said. "They're all females."

"And how will four *machos* like us sustain a life together for six months?" Marc asked.

The question had been there in the back of my mind, persistent as a toothache. How do four men live together, twenty-four hours a day, for six months, in a cramped floating prison cell? We had all heard of prisoners going stir crazy, sometimes killing each other on the tiniest provocation. Obviously we couldn't expect to have found four perfectly stable individuals. But if we were lucky, our neuroses might prove complementary. We needed introverts and extroverts, optimists and pessimists, romantics and realists, conservatives and liberals—a mixed bag of human strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, we had to establish a modus vivendi that would minimize friction and prevent a fatal blowup.

Consequently, one evening about a week after our arrival at Guayaquil, I leaned back in my chair at the Hosteria Madrid, the neighborhood restaurant where we ate after work, and broached the subject as casually as possible. "I've been thinking we should have some guidelines," I said.

"Like the division of work?" asked Marc.

"Well, that's important. But I mean our relationship to each





other. On a long journey in such close quarters we're bound to get on each other's nerves from time to time." I hesitated, searching for the right words. "First, we should never violate each other's personal space. We should never—under any circumstances—touch each other. No horseplay, no wrestling—"

"But why?" interrupted Gabriel. "If it's only playing . . ."

"That's just the point," I replied. "Once you have violated another man's space, even in fun, it will be easier to touch him in anger. So we have to imagine that each of us is surrounded by an invisible bubble of privacy that must never be shattered. And another thing, we must never criticize each other."

Gabriel softly drummed on the table with his fingers. "You think even a small criticism could blow up into a fight?"

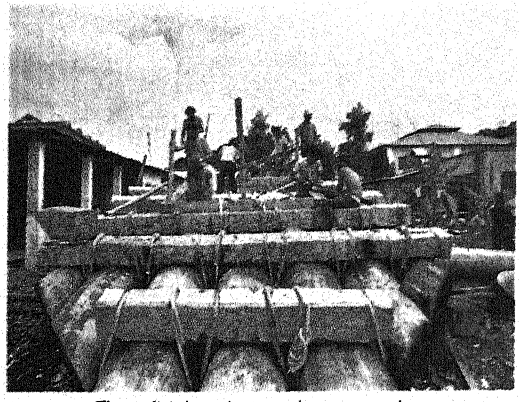
"Precisely. When you start to complain about a man's eating habits or his snoring—it makes no difference that you're only

joking—human nature dictates that he will end up hating you."

"You want us to become saints," said Marc.

"For about six months, until we get to Australia. Then we can be humans again."

The following morning I was up early to check the progress on our raft. Marc had indeed performed the best marriage between the seven logs, with the longest, a forty-two-foot trunk, in the middle. Their forward ends were cut on a diagonal to form a pointed bow. We then bound them together with thick hemp ropes, presoaked in water for added pliancy, carefully fitting the ropes into parallel grooves we had carved into the logs. To preserve the logs, Marc coated their undersides with crude oil.



The raft takes shape as heavy crossbeams are lashed across the logs.

Now we were ready to start on the superstructure. Four heavy beams were laid across the base logs and firmly secured with one-inch hemp. Then a deck of split bamboo was placed across the beams, creating narrow storage spaces between the deck and the logs. The deck itself was covered with mats of woven reeds.

It was slow, tedious work: hundreds of knots had to be tied with great precision, for if only a few were carelessly tied, our raft might rip apart in mid-ocean. I found myself rechecking some that Gabriel had tied near the starboard stern. Each one was perfect. When I saw Normand checking my knots, I laughed. "We're all spies," I said. "No one trusts anyone."

Gabriel was no less vigilant when we started to build the cabin, checking everyone's handiwork as if he were a straw boss on a construction gang. "We've got to be careful with the roof," I said. "If it comes loose in a high wind, it'll be like a second sail." Thus we took special pains with the walls of woven bamboo reeds and

with the roof made from bamboo slats and tough, pliable banana leaves.

In front of the cabin we erected the 30-foot mast: two poles of hard, durable mangrove wood, tied at the top to form an inverted V. Atop this was a small crow's nest and a flagpole from which, in good weather, we would fly the Spanish colors.

The sail was a rectangle of strong canvas, 18 feet wide and 21 feet high. In a moment of whimsy I decorated it with a huge bright-red sun, in the center of which I painted a sketch of *La Balsa*. There wasn't room for a spare sail, but we had plenty of needles and thread for repairs.



Complete but for the mast, *La Balsa* prepares to enter the water.

Perhaps the raft's most advantageous feature was its set of *guaras*, vertical keel boards, or centerboards, each two feet wide and six to eight feet long. Situated between the logs, they protruded under the raft like multiple fins—three in a V-shaped formation near the bow, two under the cabin, and four in a straight line at the stern.

Ecuadorian fishermen, who steer their balsa rafts much as their ancestors did, had shown us how the *guaras* were used. To steer the raft from left to right, we would slide the starboard (right) *guaras* deeper into the water while pulling the portside (left) *guaras* out of the water. The most important were the *guaras* at the corners of the stern. These would have to be shifted to compensate for winds blowing from an angle. Although simple, the technique is crucial to keeping a raft on a steady course.

The final addition was a tall dignified "throne" of choice balsa wood, with a large hole in the seat like an old-fashioned privy. And that's exactly what it was—an amphibious toilet, which we perched on a special portside shelf hanging over the water.

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Several weeks later, our raft completed, we proudly inspected our work. Not a single nail, wire cable, or metal spike had been used. We wanted *La Balsa* to duplicate, as closely as possible, those ancient craft that had been navigated across the Pacific thousands of years before.

2

THE DAY we left port, fifty or sixty friends and skeptics came aboard our little raft at Guayaquil to wish us well—or to shake their heads with dismay. One optimist was Senora Paladines, the wife of a local doctor. Wearing a floppy hat and a flowery dress, she carried in her white-gloved hands a scrawny black and white kitten. "It's a mascot, for good luck!" she exclaimed.

"But it's only a baby," I protested. "This is going to be a rough journey."

"Kittens are always good luck," she said.

One potbellied old sailor said, "Two or three days is all I give this thing before the logs start soaking up water like a sponge."

The doctor's wife cut him short. "Nonsense," she said. "*La Balsa* will go all the way to Australia."

Grateful as I was to her, I was not happy with the mascot she'd given us. We already had four pets: a much older cat, Cocos; a large parrot, Lorita; and two smaller parrots. I would have to give this fragile little creature away before setting sail.

More pressing matters, however, demanded our immediate attention. Our secondhand radio—a patchwork of Japanese tubes, German condensers, an American tuning device, and Ecuadorian adhesive tape—suddenly went dead. Joe Megan, an American who happens to be president of one of Ecuador's largest electronics companies, helped us fix it, warning us that it probably wouldn't transmit anything beyond a few hundred miles.

We hardly listened to such talk as we loaded our storage area with 52 gallons of fresh water, kerosene for our small stove, gasoline to run the radio's generator, extra rope, a few books, medicines, and fishing gear.

Marc's special concern was the food supply. In a wooden box

behind the cabin we had 330 pounds of canned fruit; 220 pounds each of potatoes, green bananas, and unripened oranges; and 44 pounds each of flour, rice, and dried beans. We expected to catch fish every day.

It was Marc's duty, which he seemed to enjoy a bit too much, to curb our natural appetites. Nothing extra that anyone wanted to take (pizza for Gabriel, mangoes for me) could meet his rigid specifications. "It will spoil without refrigeration," he would say.

I managed to eat three farewell mangoes as we carefully stitched Salvador Dali's beautiful painting over the sun I had painted on our sail. Dali had given us an emblematic portrait of our raft as a good-luck token, and we had decided to protect it against the sun and salt winds with a plastic sheath and to display it every Sunday if the weather permitted.

Immersed in all these preparations, I completely forgot about the kitten. Not until several hours after we had gotten under way, when I felt it crawling across my bare leg as I lay inside the cabin, did I realize our unwanted mascot was still with us. "What's this damned thing doing here?" I yelled, lunging for it.

Gabriel held the kitten out of my reach. "I'll take care of him," he said. He turned to Marc and Normand for support. "I'll let him sleep with me."

Realizing it would be impossible to change his mind, I finally gave in. Let them learn for themselves, I thought. The cat smells would soon drive them crazy.

Much to my annoyance this little creature, whom they christened Minet, was the only one that showed no signs of seasickness during those first few days at sea. Skittering around the deck on his tiny white paws, he looked almost perversely healthy.

"I hate healthy cats," I groaned. Still, I couldn't resist the kitten's outrageous charm or his refusal to be disliked, which is typical of so many rascals. Consequently, when a huge wave gushed over the bow and caught Minet in its backwash, I jumped to the rescue, colliding with Gabriel and Marc. When the wave receded, there was Minet clinging to the edge of the raft, with his small, sharp claws buried in the log, shaking his water-soaked head and mewing like fury. Stumbling back to the cabin with the kitten in

his hand, Gabriel grabbed a towel and dried him off. "Don't cry, Minet," he mumbled.

Shortly after his narrow escape, Minet was back, frisking about the deck, playing with the crabs swept aboard by the waves, hovering around Normand as he pulled in a fiercely flapping tuna. As Normand began cutting it up, Minet lapped the blood off the deck as if it were milk.

Having been unable to consume anything but hot bouillon since we set sail, I was momentarily sickened by the kitten's appetite. Yet I couldn't help envying its lust for life.

Unfortunately neither Minet nor Cocos was housebroken. They laid claim to one corner of the cabin, and the smell became intolerable. "Gabriel," I said, "you promised to train those cats. Now look what we have—a real mess."

He shrugged. "I'll try harder, now that I'm not so seasick."

"You'll never housebreak them," I said. "We'll simply have to keep them outside. That goes for the birds, too."

"Outside!" he protested. "But they'll get washed away."

There was a long, painful silence, but I was determined not to give in, knowing that my low tolerance for odors would eventually result in anger.

"I guess you're right," he said in a barely audible voice. "It's silly to fight about cats." He took Minet and Cocos outside.

On the third or fourth day we were escorted by several large dolphins, scores of tuna and bonito, plus other species we couldn't identify. And toward sunset—an incredible burst of flame across the entire horizon—some flying fish came whizzing past our sail and plopped on deck, flapping toward the cabin as Cocos scrambled for cover. Minet, on the other hand, started circling one of the fish and pawing at it.

"*Cuidado* (Look out), Minet!" said Gabriel, holding him back by the tail. "He'll swat you."

The smaller flying fish we used as bait for the more edible thirty-pound dolphins; the larger ones were fried in a skillet. Useful as they were, they often proved a nuisance. At night they would come winging through the air unseen, often crashing into our faces. One gave me a black eye that bothered me for a week.

Other small fish, such as sardines, were tossed on deck by the waves, and one of the night watch's final chores was to collect them for the day's meal. Occasionally Minet would participate in the roundup, and sometimes he would carry a sardine into the cabin as an offering to one of the sleeping crew. I was not amused when he tried to feed me one in the middle of a prolonged snore.

By now our seasickness had subsided, though mine had left me with a fever. We had all developed hearty appetites, especially when Marc prepared fillets of shark stuffed with crab meat. But most of the time our seafood meals were plainer fare. I was a mediocre cook; Normand and Gabriel left much to be desired. Since cooking chores were evenly divided, we ate well every fourth day.

Shortly after dawn of our sixth day at sea the wind shifted suddenly, blowing from astern with increased force. We struggled to pull in the sail and were nearly swept overboard before we managed to haul it down. The waves grew higher, pushing us forward at a breakneck pace, and our main worry was the danger of broaching—twisting around broadside so that a breaker could roll us over. Finally, by maneuvering the *guaras,* we were able to keep *La Balsa* moving with the waves, which resembled rows of foam-capped mountains marching behind, then under and past us.

Time and again the peaks would curl forward and splash down into the trough we had just vacated. And once in a while a huge rogue wave would break the rhythm, dropping tons of water against us broadside. Had any of these hit us a few seconds sooner, the thundering avalanche would have smashed our cabin like a straw hat. Fearing that possibility, we stayed outside, clinging to the crossbeams, while the raft pitched, yawed, reeled, and spun around like a matchstick in a whirlpool. Fortunately we had left the *guaras* in the proper positions and our steering worked by itself, for the waves blinded us and incapacitated us completely.

Then gradually the gale shifted away from us, and the watery Alps became a rippling prairie.

TOWARD the end of our first week we reached the Humboldt Current, that broad cold mass of water that sweeps north from the Antarctic, runs along the coasts of Chile and Peru, then veers

northwest across the Pacific just below the equator. I checked the sea temperature and found it much colder than I had expected. The water was also a deeper, richer green, indicating an abundance of plankton, the drifting forms of marine life, ranging in size from microorganisms to jellyfish, which move along with the sea currents and provide food for fish and other larger marine bodies. Since we would be riding the Humboldt well past the Galápagos





Left: Vital, literally, catches a flying fish.
Right: After a storm bedding is spread on the cabin roof to dry.

Islands, we would be assured of a steady supply of fresh fish.

Halfway to the Galápagos we began shedding our clothes for two reasons. With waves and spray constantly washing over us, and frequently rain, too, we soon realized we wouldn't be completely dry again until journey's end. We spent hours wringing out our clothes and blankets, and hanging them up, until the next barrage of waves soaked everything again.

The second reason was the blisteringly hot sun. Soon after dawn each day we abandoned our sweaters, shoes, and shirts, until finally we were wearing only skimpy loincloths. The 115-degree heat would make the cabin feel like the inside of a boiling teakettle. "I could poach a fish in there," Marc observed one afternoon as clouds of steam drifted through the doorway.

Thus, unable to shelter ourselves against the noonday sun, we would lie or sit helplessly on the deck, getting darker than the

natives who had helped us cut down the balsa trees. We also got blisters, and our hair became so dry it felt like needle-sharp wire filled with electricity. Worse yet, Normand and I broke out in saltwater boils that itched worse than poison ivy.

But when the sun disappeared and the night winds blew, the temperature would drop fifty or sixty degrees in a few hours. We'd be shivering in the sudden chill, and all we could do was wrap ourselves in damp clothes and blankets, and huddle inside the cabin. "I can't believe that you can freeze and catch pneumonia right on the equator," Gabriel said one night.

"Don't worry, Gabriel," Marc said comfortingly. "After sunrise you'll long for the cold again."

Now, favored by a steady wind out of the southeast, we sailed a course that would take us well south of the Galápagos Islands. On clear days I would check our course on the sextant. I generally took at least three sightings of the sun, then plotted our location on a chart. We were moving at a slow, even pace, which we could gauge by tossing slivers of banana leaves into the water and then counting the seconds it took for the raft to pass them. If it took us ten seconds to pass the marker, our 42-foot raft would be moving 84 yards per minute, thus covering approximately three miles per hour, or 72 miles a day. This yard-by-yard progress might have been disheartening, but we did not dare let it depress us.

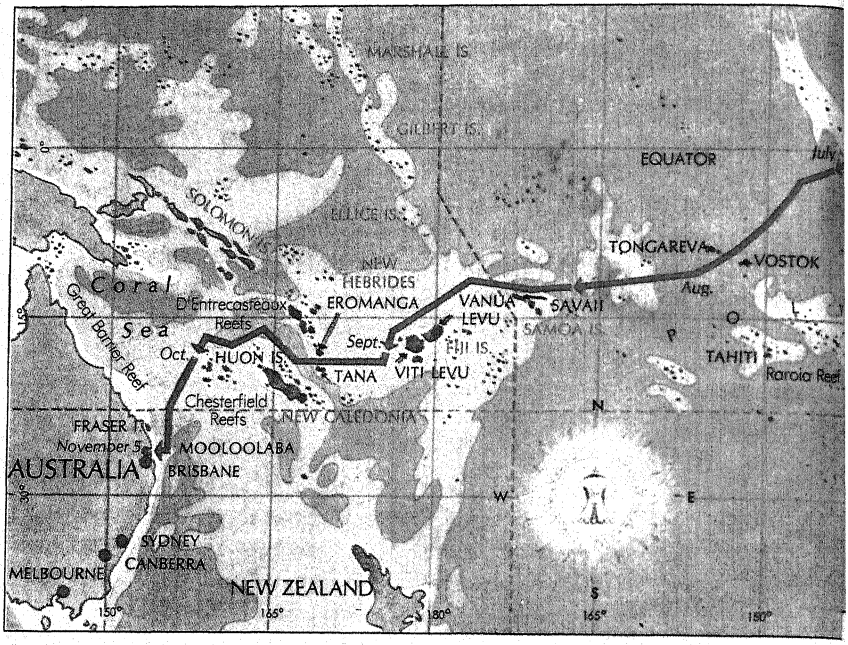
As we moved into the swiftest part of the Humboldt, the waves got bigger. Standing watch one morning Normand failed to notice a large wave breaking toward the stern. It washed him overboard before he could yell for help. Fortunately he was able to scramble back on board after a frantic few seconds.

"What were you doing—chasing sharks?" I asked him.

"Oh boooy," he said in an expiring whisper.

"Well, you can't chase sharks without a rope around your waist," I said, thereby establishing a rule that all watchmen must be attached to the mast by a long rope. Even as I spoke I noticed two sharks cruising about twenty feet astern. They could have chewed Normand to mincemeat.

Since there were four of us, each had two three-hour turns at the helm every twenty-four hours. Those first days, when we were

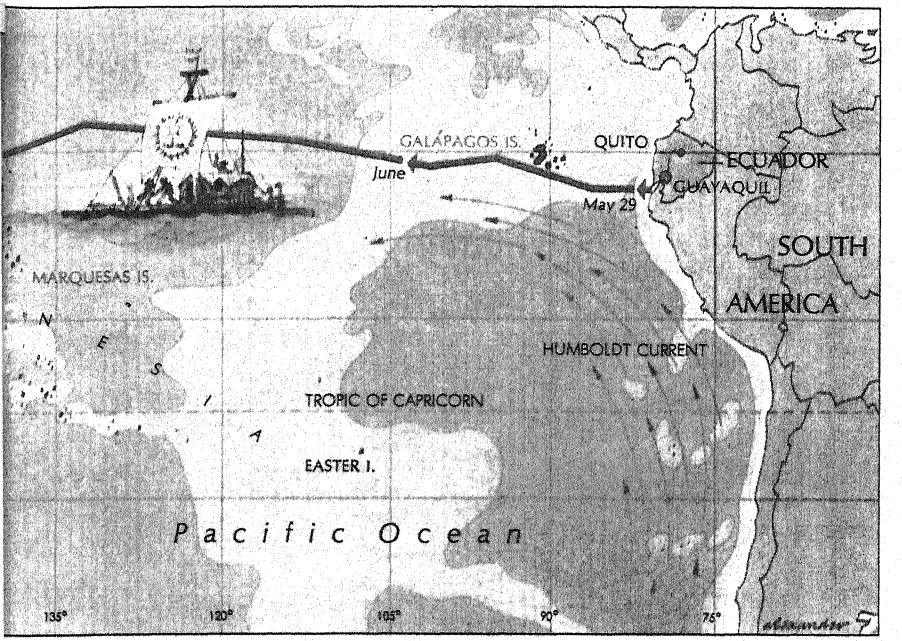


still relatively soft landlubbers, were especially hard. Fatigued and muscle-sore I would crawl into my sleeping bag, but inevitably, just as I fell asleep, someone would awaken me for some emergency. Thus I was finding it impossible to shake off the high fevers that persisted long after my seasickness had gone.

"You'd better lay off for a couple of days," Marc finally warned.

But having seldom been ill I foolishly believed that the best way to fight sickness was to ignore it. So I took aspirin and continued with my share of work, drenched in cold sweat and suffering an occasional dizzy spell.

As it turned out I had no time to rest. On the ninth day a huge storm assaulted us close to sundown, gradually forcing us north. In an effort to avoid the treacherous currents just south of the Galápagos, we pulled in the sail and lashed down our *guaras*, hoping they would hold us to a westerly path. Then, having seen how well the cabin weathered the first storm, we took refuge in it.



The waves grew to ten or fifteen feet high. "Tie your waists!" I yelled, securing my own and tying the loose end of the rope to a post. "It's going to be rough!"

"What about the animals?" asked Gabriel, already holding Minet in his arms.

"I'll take Cocos," Marc volunteered. "Vital can take Lori, and Normand the smaller parrots."

Then it came. A huge mass of water loomed over us for several agonizing seconds, then crashed into the cabin, spinning the raft around. Cawing madly, Lori tried to flutter out of my grasp. Minet let out a frightened but angry meow, then another, as the next wave gushed through the doorway and tilted the cabin crazily.

But the bamboo cabin held firm throughout the two-hour storm, the knots of the ropes pulling even tighter with the additional strain. When the sea finally subsided, however, the interior was chaos, our bedding strewn about like limp dishrags.

Gabriel, with Minet now perched cockily on his shoulder, was the first to leave the cabin, quickly surveying the damage with a flashlight. The rest of us followed.

"Not too bad," Gabriel said. "We came off pretty well."

"I'm a little worried about our course," I said, feeling slightly dizzy again. "Damned storm probably carried us too far north."

I dragged myself back to the cabin, hot flushes of renewed fever rising through my chest and head. We were approaching the Galápagos, where my first raft expedition had come to a sorry end, and I kept thinking about that voyage.

The winds and ocean currents had pushed the *Pacifica* into the treacherous eddies north of the Galápagos. Round and round we had gone, imprisoned in a huge loop of contrary currents and erratic winds, unable to get back to the westward swing of the Humboldt Current. Days, weeks, finally months had passed with no ships coming near us. Our only contact with land had been our often malfunctioning radio. Finally, after 143 days at sea, the raft had begun to absorb water, the balsas rotting from the core out as the sap fermented.

I remembered the frantic messages to and from the radio hams who had followed our progress, the bizarre upward tilt of the raft as the stern began to settle. We had scrambled onto the roof of the cabin as several sharks slithered across the sinking logs. Then, as the cabin itself began to founder, we had been miraculously rescued by a German ship—just two hours before the raft submerged completely.

I had relived that nightmare adventure many times, and so had Marc. But both of us had been determined to try again.

The next morning the sea was still running high, but with the sun beating down on the matted deck, everything looked clean and bright. Gradually, the sea grew calmer.

"You're looking much better, Vital," Marc said.

"I think so," I said. "I'm ready to read my maps again."

With Normand's help I laid out the navigation map Admiral Fernandez had given me, and located our whereabouts with the aid of a compass and my sextant.

My calculations indicated that the southeast trade winds and

the Humboldt Current had been sending us northwest at about fifty to sixty sea miles per day. Once again we were faced with the possibility of drifting into the trap where the *Pacifica* finally sank. With great caution I swung the sail a few degrees to the west, shifting our path from northwest to northwest by west. With luck we would swing west with the main part of the Humboldt, ten or twenty miles south of the Galápagos.

"I wish we were going closer," said Gabriel. "I've been told that the islands are beautiful."

"They are," I said, and described for him the jagged black lava rocks rising out of the sea, polished for centuries by Pacific waters and gleaming in the equatorial sun like black diamonds. I also told him about the multicolored lizards, flightless cormorants waddling along the coasts, marine iguanas that looked like miniature prehistoric monsters, and playful sea lions body surfing and drying themselves to a light beige on the hot sand.

"There are also enormous turtles in this region," I said.

"I know," said Gabriel. "Normand caught one this morning." He pointed over his shoulder. "We've got him tied to the stern."

"I've got an idea," said Marc. "We'll tow him behind us to attract fish. The dorados are always chasing turtles."

Gabriel made a hole in the back end of the shell and secured a strong line through it. Then we lowered the huge turtle into the water. Soon a procession of dorados, tuna, and sardines was trailing after us. That evening we had Dorado L'Modena, since it was, fortunately, Marc's day to cook.

After supper we all sat on deck, playing Parcheesi and speculating about the weather. During a lapse in conversation I became aware of a continuous creaking and groaning in the raft under us—the deck, the crossbeams, the mast, the cabin, the *guaras*, were constantly straining against the ropes. No raft built with inflexible nails and screws could have lasted very long on these waters. Would our ropes withstand the ceaseless friction?

The next morning I examined a few, and was relieved to find they were in excellent shape. The balsa wood showed no signs of excessive wear, and I detected no shredding of the sail—though the sun I had painted in the center was somewhat faded.

Aware of my scrutiny, Marc touched the lower margins of the painting. "I'm glad we've got the Salvador Dali painting encased in plastic. The salt winds would ruin it."

"How did you get him to paint it?" Gabriel asked me.

I had been convinced from the outset that we needed a fine painting for our sail, something that would inspire us all the way to Australia. Being a Spaniard, I naturally wanted to have it painted by one of my countrymen—either Picasso or Dali. It would have to be a gift, however, as we could not afford even a pencil sketch by one of these artistic giants. I soon found out that Picasso would be impossible to reach, but I managed to get Dali's phone number in Madrid and called him. Not until later did I realize that it was three in the morning when his phone rang.



Vital, Gabriel, and Marc inspect the giant turtle.

"Aalooo," said a raspy voice at the other end.

"Is this Salvador Dali?" I asked.

"I think so," he said sleepily.

"This is Vital Alsar," I said. "The man who is sailing a raft from Ecuador to Australia. I want you to do a painting for my sail."

A long silence on his end of the line.

"Maestro? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here."

So I proceeded with a breathless spiel about my need for a talisman, stressing that I couldn't pay for it. Finally, I asked, "Will you give me the painting?"

Another agonizing silence.

"*Olé!*" he said, his voice coming to life. "*Olé! Olé! Como tienes macho, hombre. Sí, te lo doy.*" He meant that I had a lot of nerve and that he would give me a painting.

Several months later, in the presence of numerous reporters and TV newscasters, with klieg lights and cameras, Dali spread out a canvas on the floor of a hotel banquet room, and painted an "instant masterpiece" for *La Balsa.* It was a rather abstract painting of a raft, a heart, and a huge sun against a background that symbolized courage and daring.

Later that afternoon, when I crawled into the cabin, I saw Minet sitting there facing Dali's painting, which we had taken down and stored against the rear wall. He whirled around like a burglar caught red-handed. In his paw was a loose end of the string we had used to hemstitch the canvas. He bolted between my legs and escaped.

There goes a cool kitten, I thought. And a born delinquent. It was hard to believe he was less than five weeks old.

During dinner I was about to tell the others about Minet's latest stunt when I was interrupted by a raspy sound. It was Gabriel. With every bite, he would crunch his teeth into the base of the spoon—*craack!*—then scrape the food off with his upper front teeth, producing a *rassp* like a shovel on bare cement. *Craack rassp craack rassp*—all through every meal. It was beginning to annoy me almost beyond endurance. But, according to my own rule, I couldn't complain to him about it.

Worse yet was the way Marc ate on the days when Gabriel or Normand did the cooking. He would show his disdain for their food by dropping his lower jaw after every chew, letting it sag for three or four seconds, and then swallowing with a painful effort.

Occasionally, when my nerves reached the breaking point, I would sneak off to my favorite retreat behind the cabin and brood until my pent-up emotions gradually subsided.

We each had such a retreat, where no one would bother us. Normand's was the starboard corner of the bow; Marc's was on the portside edge of the stern; and Gabriel would always sit inside the cabin. The time we spent there would vary from a half hour to several hours, and the only one who dared to intrude was Minet. But he himself had a retreat—the forward tip of the cabin roof, where he would sit on his haunches, immobile as a gargoyle.

3

BY THE grace of God and strong southeastern winds, we managed to skirt the Galápagos without being snared in the treacherous crosscurrents. But our luck soon came to an end.

Our pets began to die. One by one they succumbed to a strange viral infection that I later learned was akin to psittacosis, the deadly and highly contagious fever carried by certain birds and readily transmitted to other animals—as well as to humans.

One of the little parrots, Fernando, was the first to go. He had shrieked a few swearwords on our first day at sea, but after a while he could barely manage a weak phlegmy *aaark*. Finally, on June 16, he fell dead. We slowly lowered his cage into the sea, then watched it gently sinking as a hundred sardines converged upon it.

Cocos, the older cat, was the next to die. He had been sick, off and on, from the very beginning, feebly resisting Minet's devilish pranks. How he must have resented the kitten's good health.

"You can't kill a kitten that drinks blood," Marc had observed one morning when Minet was skittering around the sleepy prone body of the larger cat, vainly trying to start a game of tag. "There you have the perfect symbols of life and death."

A few hours later Cocos crawled into a corner of the cabin and quietly lay down to die. Minet was nuzzling his face, apparently trying to awaken him, when I discovered the body. We wrapped him in a bag and lowered him into the water.

The other little parrot, Isabel, was the next victim. After she died, Gabriel assumed the role of ship's doctor, turning his attention to the last remaining parrot, who was also very ill. But Gabriel's practices were somewhat unorthodox. He tried to cure Lorita by crooning a lullaby as he poured wine into her beak. Two hours later she was madly flapping around her cage, but then she let out a loud, raspy squawk and flopped to the floor, dead.

We were all visibly shaken. Marc quietly wrapped her in an old blue shirt and tossed her overboard, as far out as he could. Instantly an eight-foot shark grabbed the unexpected feast.

It was a grim reminder of what might happen to all of us. My

own fever had refused to respond to large doses of aspirin, and I had what I assumed to be severe bronchitis. (Later I learned that I was probably suffering from the same disease that had killed our pets, but fortunately I didn't know it.) Weak and depressed, I saw everything in shades of gray. When I tried to play Parcheesi, the dice felt like hunks of lead in my palm. Trying to sleep at night, I could hear the beating of my heart above the noise of shifting logs and creaking ropes. I was to suffer this way for forty-five days, and for fifteen of them I was hardly able to leave the cabin. But eventually my fever subsided. I could see the relief in my crewmates' faces as they noted my improvement.

Perhaps to celebrate my return to the living, Gabriel, who knew my mania for cleanliness, set up an experimental washing machine. By hanging his pants and shirts under the raft, where the onrushing waves produced a natural agitation, he got a fairly effective saltwater wash. "I'm going to patent this and start a new business in Chile," he said. But by the fourth or fifth washing his pants were torn to shreds, and he gave up the idea. "It's all capitalist nonsense anyway," he said. He then launched into a long lecture on the glories of socialism. Inevitably he started to criticize the United States Government, which provoked counterarguments from Marc and me.

"There's more freedom in the U.S. than any other place in the world," I told him. "Even for the poor."

"How can you say that, Vital?" he protested, smacking the steering oar for emphasis. "Look how the black man is treated."

We would go on like that for hours, our voices rising, our fists pounding.

Such an argument was cut short one night by the sudden appearance of a huge pair of gaping jaws, with a double row of sharp teeth, moving toward the raft as if to bite off a chunk six feet wide. Then the jaws slowly closed and seemed to back away. Rushing to the edge of the raft, we saw an enormous "sea monster" with a broad flat head like a toad, two ridiculously small eyes on the sides, and on the immense back a fin five or six feet tall. His entire body was covered with phosphorescent plankton, so that he was clearly visible in the moonlit night. And in front of him swam

a mass of striped pilot fish, reminding me of armed henchmen preceding a powerful underworld figure.

"*Mira*, Minet," Gabriel whispered to the fascinated kitten on his shoulder. "There you have the ugliest thing in the world."

"Are the fish running interference for him?" asked Marc. "Or is he simply following them because he's too dumb to know where to go by himself?"

The answer came almost immediately. Diving suddenly, the creature lost his escort, but the striped fish quickly dived after him and regained their up-front position, like a bunch of yes-men frantically trying to second-guess the boss.

I was later told that he was probably a whale shark, a species said to reach seventy feet in length, and often weighing as much as twenty tons. Ours was only half that large, but we all felt it could be terribly dangerous if aroused.

"One swat with that tail could tear this raft apart," said Marc.

The giant shark hesitated beneath us, nuzzling the barnacles under the starboard logs and tilting us slightly to port.

"The sonofabitch is teasing us," I said.

Then, as the huge body rolled and heaved under the bow, the entire raft swayed back and forth with a loud creaking and rasping. For twenty minutes the monster remained under *La Balsa*, rocking it, all of us waiting for the sudden heave that would surely capsize us. Finally Marc reached for a thirty-pound dorado he'd begun to slice for dinner and flung it as far as he could to starboard. Immediately the striped escort fish trailed after it, and the monster followed them.

"You're a genius!" I said to Marc.

"I was a fool not to do it sooner," he growled. "But now we won't have Dorado L'Modena for supper. Just plain ordinary tuna."

Marc's tuna dishes were never ordinary, but Gabriel's were something else again. The next evening, after toiling over our little stove for more than two hours, Gabriel served us fillets of tuna floating in a goo of highly spiced grease, accompanied by a huge mound of black beans. I had swallowed two mouthfuls of the beans before I detected the odor of kerosene.

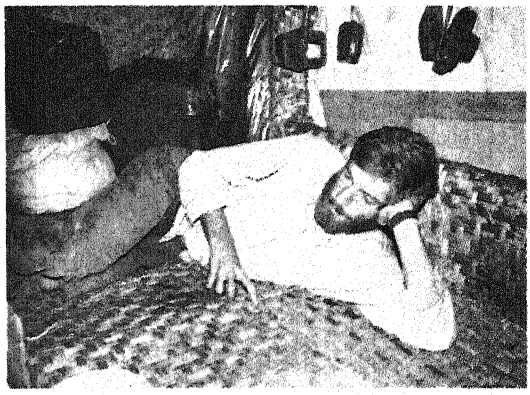
"Gabriel, you've poisoned us!" I yelled.

"What's wrong?" he said, calmly chewing a mouthful.

"The beans! They have kerosene in them."

"They do taste a little different," he finally said. "I'd better check." Though it is difficult to believe, Gabriel had actually cooked the beans in kerosene instead of water, mistaking the gasoline can for the water jug. How he had managed to avoid causing an explosion or a fire is something only his angels can explain.

Normand's manner that evening disturbed me. He had noticed nothing unusual about the beans and would probably have eaten them all if we hadn't told him. When Gabriel and I laughed about the mistake, Normand simply stared beyond us at the darkening waters, his eyes blank.



Inside the cabin Gabriel relaxes on a sleeping mat.

"Something's wrong with our friend," said Gabriel when we were back in the cabin.

"I'm afraid so," I said. "He's been that way all day." His problem, whatever it was, plagued him for the next few days. His response to any order was mechanical, like a bearded robot.

Somehow, we had to break into his withdrawal before it was too late. It would be disastrous to have him break down on the raft. I had visions of him succumbing to a serious state of immobility, or perhaps going to the other extreme, suddenly bursting into a raving anger and violence that none of us could deal with.

On the third day of his strange mood, I saw him standing near the stern with his eyes fixed on the far horizon. "The Eiffel Tower is to your left, monsieur," I said in my best Parisian French. "Or perhaps it's of no interest to you people from Marseille."

There was a faint hint of a smile, but not a word.

An hour later—once again relying on my amateur theories of psychological problems—I walked up to him with ramrod severity.

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"I must collect your passenger ticket," I said. "We can't allow any stowaways on this ship."

No response this time, not even a twitch.

Clearly we must try something more dramatic, something that would force his involvement. Perhaps a bit of psychodrama would help. Taking a flying fish from the kitchen basket, I started to slice it with a knife, knowing that Minet would soon come around to lick up the blood. Sure enough, within a few seconds he was squirming between my legs to get at the red puddles.

Cursing Minet loudly, I grabbed him and threw him across the deck, straight toward Normand. By reflex action he caught him. Still feigning rage I rushed toward him, yelling, "Give me that damned cat—I'm going to drown him!"

"Like hell you will," snarled Normand. "He's my cat."

It worked; I had broken through to him. Normand grinned. "Oooooh boy," was all he said, but it was music to our ears.

The incident reminded us again of our limitations. What, for example, would we do in case of serious illness or a traumatic injury such as a shark bite? Anticipating these contingencies, I had gotten some practical training from a group of Mexican doctors who were personal friends and patrons of our voyage. They had made me keenly aware of both the strength and the vulnerability of the human body, and had impressed upon me the frightening possibility that I might be called upon to perform a primitive operation. I kept our butcher knife sharpened to a keen edge at all times. What worried me greatly about the prospect of performing surgery was the continuous motion of the raft, even on the calmest seas.

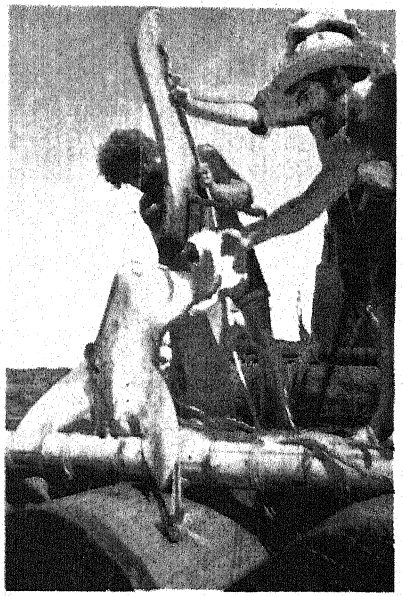
I was most concerned about shark bites, because of the sharks' constant presence. Toss an empty can from the raft, and one was there to snatch it. A piece of wood or paper—another shark. They were more menacing either very early or late in the day, when their bellies were empty. During the voyage we harpooned about one hundred sharks to keep them from scaring away the fish that followed us. Those fish were our natural larder.

One afternoon, about mid-June, Gabriel was cleaning a tuna near the stern when suddenly a huge wave carrying a six-foot

shark washed over the raft. The shark's nose bumped against Gabriel's hip, knocking him against the rear wall of the cabin. Assuming someone was playing a joke on him, he shouted in mock anger, "What kind of game is this?"

Then he noticed the shark floundering on the deck. *"Mira, el monstruo!"* he said. Marc finally killed it with a harpoon.

It was always dangerous to kill one on board because you could never be sure it was really dead. You might bend over an inert fish, only to be clobbered suddenly by its tail. Once we cut one open and took out its pulsating heart, holding it in our hands and feeling it throb for several minutes. Sometimes a shark's heart will stay alive that way for more than a half hour.



Minet is introduced to his archenemy, the shark.

Their will to live was incredible. I remember a seven-foot shark that trailed us for several miles, west of the Galápagos. We had just caught a fairly large dolphin when the shark zipped in and chewed off its tail. Marc rammed his harpoon into the shark's back again and again, but, although blood spurted from the wounds, the shark kept snapping at the dolphin, until he had almost devoured it. Then, after a last desperate lunge, he died.

That night, as I lay half asleep with the high fever that still plagued me from time to time, I was aware of a strange gnawing noise. I crept through the cabin doorway and saw thousands of fish nibbling at the edges of our raft; in the bright moonlight their eyes, unblinking and neon green, stared at me from all angles. Then, as someone behind me shouted my name, they all disappeared. It was Marc.

"There were thousands of fish," I said, shaking my head.

"There's nothing there. You must have had a nightmare."

IT WAS, INDEED, nothing more than a fever-induced hallucination. I've been told that sailors often have such hallucinations. The American sea captain Joshua Slocum, on his solo voyage around the world aboard the *Spray*, had visits from a ghostly figure who claimed to be a pilot for Christopher Columbus. I like to think that it was the ghost of Juan de la Cosa, the man who drew the famous world map and who sailed with Columbus to the new world. He was from my home city, the port of Santander.

In my childhood I was forever reminded that America might never have been discovered without the help of Juan de la Cosa, "the pride of Santander." He was always on my mind as I sat by the harbor, watching the fishing trawlers go off into the treacherous Bay of Biscay. I remember the women wailing for the men who did not come back. The harshness of the sea was etched into the character of these people—pessimistic, brooding, rugged. I loved the fishermen; they were brave, good-hearted men. Yet they feared the sea; they allowed it to dominate them.

I spent many happy days fishing or sailing on the coastal waters. "That boy will be eaten by sharks someday," my father prophesied. "He's always fooling around on the ocean. All sailors are crazy."

"What about Columbus?" my mother asked, a hint of defiance in her usually soft voice.

"He was crazy, too," my father answered. "No one else was foolhardy enough to try to reach the east by sailing west."

My childhood was interrupted by the Spanish civil war. Night after night the city of Santander, controlled by the Republican Loyalist forces, was bombed by German airplanes. Our family survived, though we had some narrow escapes.

In 1954, anxious to see the world, I dropped out of school and signed up with the Spanish foreign legion, where I became a full lieutenant at the age of twenty-two. Assigned to Morocco, my battalion had to guard some munition dumps along the Moroccan-Algerian border, fighting off attacks from Algerian rebels. While there, I came across a Spanish edition of *Kon-Tiki*, which so impressed me that I began mulling over the possibility of sailing my own balsa raft someday.

Before I could consider any such project, however, I had to

complete my education and find a way to earn my living. With the thought of becoming a language professor, I enrolled at the Alliance Française in Paris for a course of study in French. To pay my tuition, room, and board, I worked as a longshoreman, waiter, and furniture mover, attending classes after work.

After three and a half years there, and a similar period in Germany, where I learned the language while earning my keep as a construction worker, I found that the idea of an ocean adventure had become an obsession. Of course, such an expedition would cost money (even with all my bumming and scrounging of supplies, the first voyage would run about eight thousand dollars). So when someone at the construction company told me there were good, high-paying jobs in Labrador, I decided my language professorship could wait, and boarded a plane for Canada.

I worked four months at the iron mines at Wabush Lake, and managed to save almost all of the four thousand dollars I earned. I was still considerably short of my goal, so I went to Montreal and got a job teaching Spanish at a local language school. By the time I had enough money I had met Marc Modena, and we had agreed to undertake a raft voyage across the Pacific.

4

In June, as we were breezing along on a westerly current far beyond the Galápagos, we had several nights of intense fog that worried us. My charts indicated that we were crossing through shipping lanes, and we all realized the danger of a nighttime collision with a vessel that might not see our feeble lamps. Fog, particularly at night, was to be one of our worst enemies.

One night we were sailing through a thick patchy fog—the visibility ranging from five feet to two hundred—when Marc noticed some lights directly ahead of us. A large ship was moving toward us fast. Grabbing a flashlight, Marc tried to signal the approaching vessel, but the ship kept coming straight at us. Finally he managed to light two flares and shoot them upward. By then the ship loomed ahead of us like a rhinoceros bent on destruction.

"Get ready to jump," I yelled. But it wasn't necessary. The ship

angled to the right, charging past us at full speed, creating a chaos of waves that hit us broadside. "That was a real miracle," I said to Marc.

When the waves had subsided, we could see, through a break in the fog, that the ship had stopped about two miles away. "We'd better let them know who we are," I said.

The ship slowly steamed back toward *La Balsa,* its crew exchanging signals with us. Marc and I hopped into our rubber dinghy and rowed toward the vessel, beaming our flashlight so they could tell we were coming. I was hoping to ascertain our latitude (the day before, skies had been too cloudy to get a sextant reading) and perhaps get a bit of kerosene to replace the two quarts Gabriel had wasted on the beans.

Once on board we were taken directly to the captain's cabin. He was a slender, militarily erect Chinese with the coldest eyes I've ever seen. "What do you want?" he snapped, in clipped, faintly accented English.

"I want to thank you for not killing us," I said. "And to apologize for causing you to stop. I know how expensive it is."

"It certainly is," he said, in the same hostile tone.

"But now that we're here," I continued, "could you tell us the latitude?"

Consulting his chart, he read us the latitude, then added without looking up, "All right, that's all."

"Could you spare us some water?" asked Marc. "And perhaps a little rice?"

Staring at us with cool disdain, the captain turned to an officer and snapped, "All right—and give them a kilo of sugar and two kilos of rice. No more!"

When we were getting ready to leave, I approached the captain again and said, "Our raft is about three miles from here, and with all this darkness—I wonder if you could take us part of the way."

He nodded, unsmiling. But when the ship started toward the raft, which was a barely visible point of light on the dark horizon, one of the sailors noticed that our dinghy was missing.

Rushing to the portside rail, I stared into the night, but could see nothing. "The rope must have slipped loose," I said.

"Do you really need that rubber boat?" asked the captain, as if it were a useless trifle.

"It's the only one we have," I answered.

The ship circled round and round, its two huge spotlights sweeping the dark water, and the dinghy was finally located about two hundred yards away. By then the captain was furious. "If you want your dinghy," he said, "you can swim for it!"

Knowing the ship's lights might have attracted sharks, I thought he must be joking. But he was dead serious. "All right," I said. "I'll swim for it, and you'll have a good show, Captain."

I climbed down the rope ladder seething with anger and sick with fright. Halfway down, I dived. Expecting a shark at any moment, I swam those two hundred yards as if the devil himself were chasing me, and finally scrambled into the dinghy.

Numb with fatigue, I started rowing back to the ship, but when I started up the ladder, my aching muscles couldn't sustain me. I lost my grip and fell back into the dinghy. As I was about to try again, I saw Marc starting down. The captain had ordered him into the dinghy with the few supplies the crew had given us. He was abandoning us at least two miles away from *La Balsa.*

"That dirty swine," said Marc, shaking his fist toward the deck.

Water kept splashing into the dinghy, and I had to bail it out while Marc rowed. The waves were so high we kept losing sight of the raft's lantern. Worse yet, the fog was back again.

"We're going to lose them," said Marc. "We've got too much cargo on this thing."

So we dumped the rice, sugar, and water, leaving us only two bottles of rice wine, which one of the sailors had given us. Finally, after more than an hour and a half, we reached *La Balsa* and flopped on the deck in exhaustion. It was a hard night's work for two bottles of rice wine.

THE FOG finally lifted. The next few days were calm, giving us an opportunity to study the amazing variety of marine life around us. We were especially fascinated by the bright phosphorescence of the plankton, which at night turned the sea into a vast bed of glowing embers and streaks of fire.

The "embers" were actually tiny shrimp and barnacles, and the "streaks of fire" were tuna diving under the raft. But the most spectacular mirages were the strange whirling coils of flame we saw skimming the surface two or three hundred yards away.

"Those are dorados chasing each other in circles," said Marc.

"You're crazy," said Gabriel. "They're flying saucers."

The daylight hours were equally absorbing, though less dramatic. All kinds of fish and mollusks constantly swam or floated around us, washing on board with the high waves. One afternoon a baby octopus was swept onto the deck, and Minet tried to trap one of the wiggly tentacles with his paw. But the octopus suddenly wrapped its tentacle around the cat's leg. Surprised and frightened, Minet scooted around the deck, trying to knock it off, until I finally pulled it loose. In the commotion we almost knocked over the pan of rice that Marc was preparing for dinner.

"Damn it," he growled, "you'll spoil my experiment!" He was making a casserole of rice and barnacles, with oregano, thyme, and other spices. Only a French chef would know how to make such good use of barnacles. The casserole was delicious.

In spite of our high-protein seafood diet none of us seemed to lose weight. We probably weren't exercising enough. At the beginning we did push-ups, knee bends, and other calisthenics, but we eased off after a while, convinced that our regular chores would keep us in shape. Our legs stayed firm and muscular because of the constant movement of the raft. Our stomach and shoulder muscles would have benefited from daily swimming in the ocean, but the sharks and swordfish ruled out that possibility.

"All this water," Gabriel said, "and we can't even swim in it."

Gabriel's desire to swim was satisfied sooner than he expected. That night he was sitting near the stern, on his regular three-hour watch, when a large wave heaved the raft to portside and hurtled him overboard. Totally surprised, he thrashed about for a few moments, then started swimming back toward *La Balsa*, only to be thwarted by a large and playful dolphin that started nibbling his toe. By now the raft had surged ahead fifteen or twenty feet, and he had to swim furiously to catch it. "I thought it was a shark," he later told us, "and it boosted my adrenalin."

Relieved that he hadn't drowned or been eaten by sharks, I neglected to ask why he hadn't tied a rope around his waist. I thought of it next day but decided not to broach the subject.

Usually his noisy eating habits annoyed me intensely. But to my surprise he didn't scrape his spoon at breakfast. Nor did he at lunch or dinner.

"Have you noticed how quietly Gabriel has been eating today?" I asked Marc that evening.

"It's that swim he took last night," said Marc. "I think it relieved some of his tensions. He never made noises like that in Guayaquil. It isn't bad manners; it's just pent-up tensions."

Forever analyzing our personal quirks, Marc often sounded like a professor of psychology. He was, in fact, a self-educated man. Born in France, he had been captured by Nazi storm troopers at the age of fourteen and interned in a concentration camp. Finally escaping, he joined the French underground and served as a gunrunner for two years. Then, at seventeen, he got a job on a merchant ship and visited nearly every major port in the world, learning a thing or two about women and diverse cultures, and reading a vast number of paperbacks on an even greater variety of subjects. Still yearning for adventure, he joined the French Navy on his twenty-first birthday and was soon involved in the French Indochina war. Having seen so many people at their best and worst, Marc had become a wise man at an early age. His soft-spoken observations always commanded attention.

Unfortunately the therapeutic value of Gabriel's swim soon wore off, and within a few days, he was back to his *craack* and *rassp*. Had we been able to get regular music on our radio, I would have played it at top volume to drown out that noisy spoon, but we were limited to periodic messages on shortwave.

Our only communication was with a few radio hams who kept in touch with us. About two weeks after we left Ecuador, we had started hearing from a woman named Liliana, who operated a ham radio from Guayaquil. She had a soothing voice, full of warmth and subtle enthusiasm.

"I forget my husband, my children, everything for you men on *La Balsa*," she once told us. Calculating the time differentials

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as we got farther west, I realized that she often tuned in way after midnight. How could one resist such loyalty?

"When we get to Australia," I promised her one night, "we'll get you a big a koala bear."

Listening to Liliana's soft, beautiful voice, we inevitably started to speculate about her. How old was she? What did she look like? Marc was sure she was past thirty but under forty.

"She's also slender, tall, and brunette," he added.

"Nonsense!" protested Gabriel. "She's a blonde with gray-green eyes and full heavy lips."

"She's fat, fifty, and funny," I said, to tease them. "Only a homely woman can be that charming." Actually I envisioned her as gracefully slender, thirty-two years old, dark-haired, olive-skinned, and enormously sensual.

The other radio hams evoked less passionate responses. My good friend Admiral Samuel Fernandez was always in close contact with *La Balsa* through a ham station in Mexico City. From Guadalajara, Mexico, we had continuous messages of concern and support from a man named Rafael Corcuera. There were others who kept track of our progress by asking our position and charting it on maps. Occasionally the hams would arrange direct communication between one of us and a member of our family. Two or three times I talked to my wife, Denise, who was always cheerful and full of good news about our two little daughters.

On July 10 a radio ham in Santiago, Chile, managed to arrange a conversation between Gabriel and his mother. "How are you, my son?" she said in Spanish, a quaver in her voice.

"I'm fine, Mama," he answered. "We're nearly halfway, and all goes well."

There was a brief pause, and then her anxious voice again: "Is there anything you need? I'll send it right away."

Luckily the circuit was cut just then, and she could not hear our laughter at her wonderfully naïve offer.

A couple of days later we hit a dead spot in the Pacific. There was not even a breeze; our sail hung limp, and the raft drifted at a snail's pace, while the sun beat down relentlessly. Drugged and drained by the fierce heat, unable to tolerate the fetid cat smells

and body odors inside the cabin, we slouched around on deck, scarcely talking to one another.

"This could drive you crazy," said Marc when the sun had gone down on the second day. "It's like living in a vacuum."

"I think I feel a breeze," I said, with more hope than conviction. "Should be better tomorrow."

Fortunately next morning a stiff breeze puffed out our sail like a pigeon's breast. Our revived spirits were reflected in my log:

July 14:

We covered 132 miles yesterday, 5½ miles per hour for a 24-hour stretch. The current is very strong and the wind from the east. My sickness has almost gone. Marc has just checked the food supply, and we have very little left—maybe not enough to reach Samoa. We shall have to live on nothing but fish or perhaps soups made from plankton.

July 17:

Good fishing. Hundreds of flying fish, with dolphins chasing them. Also lots of tuna and sharks. Everyone smells of fish, especially Minet.

The playful dolphins were around us almost constantly. They seemed extremely social and gregarious, usually traveling in groups of seven or eight, swimming side by side in perfect harmony. They communicated in a language of squeaks and whistles, which we often heard as they circled our raft, leaping over the waves in unison like chorus girls. Often called "the littlest whale," the dolphin is perhaps the most approachable of all sea animals, but for that very reason he is also the most vulnerable. They were so trusting that we were almost reluctant to catch them.

July 19:

On a raft you really get the feel of the sea—a feeling you can never have on a ship—because you are actually *on* the sea itself, in close physical contact with it. You can feel the currents, the changes in temperature. Sometimes you can actually see the fingers of a new current rippling toward you, often at speeds of 10 knots or more. The water temperature sometimes changes abruptly—particularly near the equator—from 25 to 35 degrees in seconds.

I'm convinced that you must become a part of nature to feel nature. You must become one with the sea, one with the fish. The sea is like a woman—soft, wild, sweet, moody. You can never understand these changes of mood. It is like your first love, pure and virgin, stormy and turbulent—always testing you and confounding you. If you want to conquer the sea, you must first prove that you are really strong. She will push you to the limit, but if you come through, she will open her arms and protect you.

July 30:

Today we pass 142° 05′ W, the longitude of the *Kon-Tiki*'s final landing on Raroia Reef after its 4300-mile voyage from Peru. *La Balsa* has taken 62 days compared with *Kon-Tiki*'s 101 days, and we are passing Raroia 1000 miles to the north.

IT WOULD be false modesty to minimize the pride we felt in having duplicated Thor Heyerdahl's historic voyage on the *Kon-Tiki.* But now we faced the most difficult part of our journey, the treacherous expanse of the South Seas.

Almost every sailor who has traveled the Pacific has his own story to tell of the passage through the Samoa Islands, the Fijis, the New Hebrides, and the Saumarez Reefs. There are hundreds of reef barriers, most of them uncharted, and hurricanes and cyclones that have made matchwood of many a ship.

Here, then, was the real test. We wanted to prove that the Incas and Huancavilcas could have navigated these waters, some of the most difficult in the world, on balsa rafts like ours.

"The *Kon-Tiki* started to fall apart about here," Gabriel reminded us. "How can we be sure about this raft?"

We decided to have a look at the logs. Three hours later, after carefully puncturing each one below water level and examining bits of balsa from inside, we were happily assured that they were in excellent shape, having absorbed almost no water.

As dangerous as any reef or hurricane were the boredom and personal tensions of our crew. It was inevitable that we would become restless and edgy, repeating the same monotonous routine day after day. There were days when nothing seemed to go well, when the *craack* and *rassp* of Gabriel's spoon was more grating

than ever, and even Normand's quiet nature made me uneasy. On such days we stayed clear of each other, consciously expanding our bubbles of privacy.

Another problem was fresh water. Marc told me our supplies would probably run out before we reached Australia. "Then we'll have to chew raw fish to quench our thirst," he said.

My own reading about the Huancavilcas and Incas had reassured me on this point. Aside from chewing raw fish, they would squeeze the moisture from pieces of fish by twisting them in strips of cloth. They would also extract juices from the lymphatic glands of larger fish like dorados and tuna. When I tried it, the ooze tasted terrible, but the percentage of salt was so low that my thirst quickly vanished in spite of the acrid taste.

Of course, we needed a certain amount of salt in our diet, so Marc provided us with salt tablets, which we took on especially hot days when the temperature would rise to 115 degrees in the cabin and perspiration drained our bodies of salt. He also occasionally added salt water to our regular drinking water, in a ratio of one to five.

Gabriel screwed up his face after every swallow. "If we had some coca leaves to chew on, this would be easier to take," he said. "That's what the Incas did. They found that cocaine would kill the taste of anything. I should have brought some."

"And you might have become addicted," said Marc.

"You old fogies think everything's addictive," answered Gabriel. "Look at all the nonsense you hear about marijuana. Yet some studies show that it's less addictive than ordinary tobacco, and less harmful than alcohol."

Drugs, politics, and the Vietnam war were the principal topics of conversation, and, of course, we never reached a consensus. When our talk got too serious, Normand would start singing the chorus of a song he had picked up somewhere.

"He sings better in the bath," Marc observed one morning as Normand lay on the rear deck, the waves washing over him.

We all took baths that way, grabbing a rope looped around a crossbeam to keep from being swept off the raft. The water was cool and refreshing, but our bodies were always left with a residue



In mid-Pacific, Vital and Normand adjust the rigging as *La Balsa* proceeds under full sail.

of itchy salt. Gabriel was bothered most by it. "The first thing I'm going to do in Australia is take a long hot shower to get rid of this damned salt," he said, scratching his back. "And then I'm going to eat the biggest meal I've ever eaten."

For some reason, he had developed a great fear of starvation. Every morning he would ask Marc about our food supplies.

"We're doing all right," Marc would say, trying to reassure him.

"Are you sure?" Gabriel would ask.

"Of course. Even if all our rice and canned foods are used up, we still have all the fresh fish we can eat."

"But what if we hit another dead spot in the sea?"

To allay his fears, I told him we could eat plankton if worse came to worst. Fortunately we never had to, but we did collect some in a cone-shaped cloth suspended from the bow.



Marc makes an entry in the log. Behind him is *La Balsa*'s "amphibious toilet."

"*Aach!* It looks like a mess of fat, slimy germs," said Gabriel. "I'd rather starve than eat that stuff."

"Don't worry, Gabriel," said Marc, nudging me. "I'll make us a nice casserole with it—with a fine wine sauce."

Plankton, seaweed, barnacles, and crabs gradually accumulated on the bottom and sides of *La Balsa.* Gabriel explored the underside of the raft, with Normand and Marc keeping a sharp lookout for sharks. "We've got a botanical garden down there!" he exclaimed. Thick long strands of seaweed, like creeping ivy, threatened to climb onto the deck, but we managed to keep them under control by scraping them off periodically.

We had less success combating legions of small ants that fed on the seaweed. In spite of all our precautions, the ants had hidden inside the porous balsa logs before we left Guayaquil, surfacing when we were out at sea. Now they swarmed all over the

raft, burrowing into our sleeping bags and keeping us awake with mean little stings. They crept up our legs and arms as we sat on deck during the day, sharing our food at every meal.

"Don't these ants ever sleep?" asked Gabriel, scraping one off his breakfast plate.

"In shifts," said Marc. "The morning shift has just come on."

Our best weapon against them was provided by nature. During a good heavy storm some ants would be washed overboard.

But, of course, we were also susceptible to the same danger. One such storm struck us early in August. Dark ominous clouds rushed toward us from the east, blotting out the sun and rumbling along with the harsh driving winds.

"All hands on deck!" I yelled. "Here comes a big one. Tie everything down!"

As the wind howled like a demented demon, we started to pull in the sail with all our strength. Two or three times Normand was nearly swept overboard as he struggled to fold the lower flap. Battling with the ropes for almost half an hour as successive waves drenched us, we finally got the sail in. Then, just as we were tying it down, a huge wall of water swept toward us. The raft heaved sideways, up and over the wave's back, just as it broke, hissing and foaming at the crest. Riding through the churning foam which engulfed us, we slid down into the broad trough. Then the next wall of water came at us, tossing the raft into the air, carrying it through another curtain of foam.

"Here comes another!" shouted Marc, grabbing the mast.

"Ooooh b—" I heard Normand say, but a deafening clap of thunder drowned out his voice.

A sheet of rain washed over us like water from a fire hose, slashing the deck and cabin for ten or fifteen minutes. Holding on to the mast, I looked up at the dark clouds and began to shout, "Chisco!" (My nickname for my favorite saint, San Francisco.) "Listen to me, Chisco! Why did you double-cross us this way? Why didn't you give us fair warning?"

Somehow *La Balsa* managed to withstand the onslaught. Then suddenly, as if an unseen celestial referee had blown a whistle, the storm eased and the raft started riding the waves like a gull.

An hour or so later Gabriel approached me with a serious expression. "You shouldn't have talked that way to Saint Francis," he said, fingering his good-luck coin. "It wasn't his fault."

Actually my presumed blasphemy was a convenient mask for a deeply felt belief in a supreme being. Chisco was merely His surrogate. I suspect that most sailors—even those who pride themselves on being tough, hard-drinking womanizers—have a streak of hidden piety in them. Facing the elements of nature day after day, they must inevitably question the reasons behind those gigantic forces which, for the landlubber, are simply lines on a map on a television weather forecast.

5

BOTH the winds and the currents were sluggish during the rest of that first week in August, but we made some progress to the west. The listless water was coated with scum, seaweed, and man-made debris—beer cans, paper plates, even a bamboo cane with a plastic handle. Fortunately, a stiff wind soon pushed us away from this ecological graveyard.

On the afternoon of August 8, as we were moving out of the Polynesian longitudes toward Melanesia, we had a staticky radio conversation with Rafael Corcuera in Guadalajara, Mexico. Just before we signed off, he asked about our food supplies.

"Gabriel thinks we're going to starve," I answered with a chuckle. "And I'm dying for a good steak and some French fries—but Marc says we'll have to eat raw fish for the next two months."

Unknown to me, we had a terribly faulty circuit, and all Rafael had heard were the words "starve," "dying," and "raw fish." Fearing the worst, he put in an emergency call to Admiral Fernandez in Mexico City. Together they contacted the U. S. Naval Station at Pearl Harbor, telling them that a raft was in distress somewhere between the Polynesian and Melanesian islands.

On the morning of August 11, as we were enjoying a breakfast of flying fish, we had a frantic message from Guadalajara, informing us that "a ship is on the way." I tried to tell Rafael to leave us alone, but our transmitter was apparently dead.

"Why in God's name does he want to send a ship?" I asked.

"Don't let it bother you, Vital," said Marc. "Rafael means well. He's just a worrywart."

No one seemed to share my determination to remain totally independent, and since I was a minority of one, I eased up.

"Now let's have a little contest," Marc said. "Whoever sees the ship first will get an extra ten thousand points on his canasta score." We had been playing a continuous day-to-day game of canasta since our departure from Guayaquil, and most of our scores now exceeded the million mark.

It was Normand who, late that afternoon, sighted a small speck to the northeast. "There's the ship," he said, obviously thinking of the extra points he had just won.

As the speck grew larger we could see it was a good-size naval ship. Still several miles away, it managed to establish radio contact with us. It was the USS *Granville S. Hall,* a special project-and-research ship weighing 11,600 tons. I could imagine how primitive our raft must have looked to them.

When the *Hall* got within a mile of us, it stopped and lowered a motor launch, which roared toward *La Balsa,* spewing a V of white foam. Less than three minutes later it pulled alongside the raft and two crewmen came on board. They greeted us warmly and told us their captain had invited us to dinner.

"We do not want to trouble you," I answered in my halting English. "You are too kind."

They smiled. "No trouble at all. Everyone wants to meet you."

They attached a towrope to our bow and started tugging *La Balsa* toward the ship. Meanwhile I went back to the cabin to answer a signal on our radio, which seemed to be working better. It was Joe Megan calling from Guayaquil.

"Vital!" he exclaimed. "I can't believe this, amigo. I've been in touch with an American ship that's close to you, the USS *Hall.* They say you're west of the Polynesian longitudes."

"Of course," I said. "I reported that several days ago."

"I know," he said. "But I didn't believe you could transmit messages from anywhere beyond the Galápagos on that lousy radio I fixed for you."

Then the low, resonant voice of Admiral Fernandez broke in from Mexico City. "I've always believed in you, Vital. Congratulations and a warm embrace."

I was so absorbed in my conversation that I failed to notice a commotion outside the cabin. Then I felt a tremendous jolt. Rushing out, I saw the huge gray bulk of the *Hall* looming over us. The launch had pulled us too close to the ship.

"Watch out!" someone cried, as the hull rammed us again, with a loud splintering crunch.

Our trip is over, I told myself, with a sick feeling in my gut. The raft will be smashed to pieces.

Pushing against the hull with bamboo poles, we somehow managed to shove the raft away. Then the ship moved some distance off, the captain having seen our danger.

"We heard something crack down here," said a crewman.

"That was only the toilet," I said, attempting to conceal my disappointment as I looked at the mess of crushed balsa wood.

Waving good-by to Minet, who was standing at the cabin doorway with an aloof, go-ahead-and-leave-me expression, we jumped into the launch for the short trip to the ship.

The reception we got was tremendous. The entire crew shook our hands, patted our shoulders, congratulated us, and asked a hundred questions about *La Balsa.* Finally someone cleared a path for the captain himself, W. P. Karmenzid, and he shook hands with each of us, a smile lighting his bronzed, finely chiseled face. He was an Indian from the Navajo tribe. What a marvelous coincidence: here in the mid-Pacific a giant modern naval vessel commanded by an American Indian had encountered a small raft of the kind used thousands of years ago by Indians who might have been indirectly related to his ancestors.

"Welcome aboard," Karmenzid said. "Our ship is yours. And please forgive us for the damage we caused. You must be tired and hungry. We were told that you're nearly starving."

"Who told you this?" I exclaimed, scarcely believing my ears.

"Senor Corcuera, the man from Guadalajara. We got the alert from our command in Pearl Harbor two days ago."

"I don't understand," I mumbled. "We eat very well—plenty of

fish all the time." Then, as I remembered my conversation with Rafael, I began to smile. "Poor Corcuera," I said. "He didn't realize I was making a joke. I said to him, 'Gabriel thinks we are going to starve. And I'm dying for a good steak and some French fries.' But the static was so bad he must have caught only bits and pieces."

The captain was smiling now, as were his three officers.

"Well, even if there is no emergency," he said, "we're glad you're here, Captain Alsar."

We gladly accepted, and hungrily devoured, a banquet of steaks, French fries, creamed asparagus, marinated beets, hot biscuits with butter, apple pie, and ice cream. "We must be eating like sharks," I apologized, accepting a second serving of pie.

"You're welcome to everything we have," said the executive officer in a soft Southern drawl. He meant it, too. Later, when we boarded the launch, we found several crates of canned food and a container of gasoline for our radio generator.

When we got back to *La Balsa,* Minet was waiting for us on the cabin roof like a haughty gargoyle. "These Americans are incredible!" said Gabriel, as he hauled in a large box of canned fruit. "No one is more generous than they are."

Recalling his previous statements about "money-grubbing materialistic gringos," I answered with a restrained smile, "Yes, Gabriel, they have that reputation."

But when the *Hall* had disappeared below the darkening horizon, I said, "We'll have to dump it overboard, amigos. They're gone now, so they won't see us."

Gabriel was dumbfounded. "But why?" he asked.

"Because we have to make it on our own," said Marc.

"It's also too cumbersome," I added. "We have to travel light."

Reluctantly Gabriel helped us dump our American bounty into the sea—though he did manage to salvage some gasoline and a few cans of peaches and pineapple, persuading us that their use wasn't enough to invalidate our theory of self-survival.

Three or four days later, as we were approaching a passage between the islands of Tongareva and Vostok, Gabriel sat with me near the bow, his eyes squinting at the lowering sun. "We

shouldn't have thrown away that food," he said. "I think we're going to need it."

I tried to make light of his worries, though I knew they were genuine. "But we have all kinds of fish, Gabriel."

"Not as many as yesterday," he persisted. "The wind is going down, and the current's slowing. I think we're headed for another dead spot." His blue-gray eyes were staring beyond me, his jaw muscles twitching as he tightened his chapped lips.

I was suddenly reminded of the famous Donner Party that got trapped in a snowstorm in the High Sierras and finally resorted to cannibalism. Sitting there in the immense loneliness of the Pacific, knowing that it *was* possible to starve if we were stranded on a lifeless, fishless sea, I tried to visualize myself eating the flesh of one of my companions. I decided that I would rather starve, yet how could I be sure?

"Well, at least Minet won't starve," Gabriel said. "He'll eat anything, even that lousy plankton."

We had been watching Minet play a new game. He was crouched on the portside log, his right paw batting at the water as if teasing a fish. Just then he lost his balance, splashing into the water with a loud meow! Gabriel reached the edge of the raft just as I did. "My God!" he said. "Look at that!"

Minet had surfaced and was now swimming back to the raft, paddling with his forepaws and meowing furiously.

We fished him out. "He swam at least five feet!" I exclaimed.

"More," insisted Gabriel, cuddling the drenched and shivering cat in his arms. "It was at least six feet."

By now Normand and Marc had joined us, laughing with pride. Minet shook off the water with a charming arrogance.

"Now that we know this cat can actually swim, we must give him some lessons," I suggested. "Starting tomorrow."

"You're crazy, Vital," said Gabriel. "He'll drown."

"He may have to swim someday to save his life," I said. "Especially through the rough seas we're expecting."

The first lesson began after my morning watch. With Normand and Gabriel poised on the starboard log like short-distance swimming champions, I took Minet and gently tossed him into the water

six to seven feet away. Almost instantly he bobbed up, meowing angrily, then started swimming toward us.

"*Bravo, gatito!*" said Gabriel, pulling him in.

A few minutes later I tossed him about twelve feet out. Once again he paddled back to us, his strokes more measured than before. This time he accepted our praise like a seasoned champion, strutting around the deck with his tail straight up.

We repeated the experiment twice more that day, using the dinghy to row him out to twenty feet, then thirty. "He'll go even farther tomorrow," I said, drying him off with my shirt. I was determined to test the outer limits of his survival power.

So after lunch the next day, while the others sprawled on the rear mat for a short siesta, I got into the dinghy with Minet and rowed away before they could object. Gabriel spotted me when I was about ten feet away. "Don't!" he yelled. "He'll drown."

I kept on rowing, whispering encouragement at Minet as he sat on the edge of the rubber boat with cool assurance. Finally, when I had rowed fifty or sixty feet, I put aside the oars and shoved the cat toward the raft, saying, "*Buena suerte.*"

Without the slightest hesitation he started paddling with his tiny white forepaws, meowing softly to himself like a coxswain calling the stroke for a long row. He started so well that I immediately felt a sense of relief.

Then, abruptly, Minet paused. Thrashing the water for a second or two, he let out a loud meow and started paddling furiously back to the dinghy. With my oars already in the water I surged toward him with two desperate strokes as I spotted a six-foot shark racing toward us. Lunging forward, nearly capsizing the dinghy, I grabbed Minet as the shark closed in with its mouth wide open. It missed Minet by less than two feet. As I rowed toward the raft with Minet on my lap, the shark made a U-turn and came back at us. Twice it snared an oar in its teeth, but each time I twisted it away. The shark finally dived out of sight as Minet and I boarded the raft.

"I'm sorry," I told the others. "That was really stupid of me."

"It's okay," said Gabriel reassuringly. "Minet learned something from this. He got exposed to the worst danger—and survived."

At noon on August 25 I took a sextant reading and found that we were passing the 160th meridian—two-thirds of the way toward our goal. On this trackless, signless sea it was just another invisible milestone, but to us it had special, almost metaphysical, significance. We were beating the odds, doing what everyone had thought was impossible.

"This calls for a celebration," said Marc. "I've saved something for this occasion. It's under the mat behind the cabin."

We crowded around him as he lifted the bamboo mat and pulled out an object wrapped in several layers of banana leaves. It was a bottle of champagne. "There's another one," he said. "For the day we reach Australia."

Normand produced some yellow plastic cups, and we drank a toast to *La Balsa.*

Several hours later I decided to inspect the logs again. I was particularly concerned about the possible absorption of water through the grooves we had made for the ropes. Leaning over the portside log, I studied a groove just below the water level. It was soft and foam-rubbery around the cut edges, but when I pressed it with my thumb, the wood yielded only half an inch. Not bad, I thought. To make sure, I carefully punctured it with an ice pick and brought out several tiny particles of balsa wood. They looked dry—fluffy white and dry as sawdust.

"*Voilà!*" I said to Marc, showing him the samples. "It's still dry inside." A check of the other six logs yielded the same results. The ropes were in equally good condition.

The favorable diagnosis of *La Balsa*'s health gave our morale a considerable boost. We sang more, joked more, ate more, and played more canasta. Even the winds and currents were in our favor, propelling us in a southwesterly direction at an average of 130 miles a day. The islands of Samoa were not far off, prompting Gabriel to speculate about the women we might see.

Pursuing this train of thought, he suggested that we try to contact Liliana on our radio and listen to her lovely voice. After considerable fiddling, we finally heard her.

"We'll soon be in Pago Pago," whispered Gabriel during an interval of static, "where they have the most fantastic women in the

world. But they're only for Normand and me. You old married men will have to stay on the raft." He talked on about how he would teach them to sing Chilean love ballads, to dance the *cueca*, to say "I love you" in French, Spanish, German, and Greek, and to scratch his itchy, salt-powdered back.

Suddenly the radio went completely dead. "This damned machine," I said, slapping it. "Something snapped inside."

For several hours Marc and I tried to repair it, but the radio still wouldn't work. "Joe Megan was right after all," I said. "It couldn't work forever. We'll have to finish the trip without it."

The next day I took it apart again. Still dead. On the third day Gabriel took over, periodically spanking the top and sides with a few coaxing phrases in Spanish and French. Suddenly the set responded with a low, whining noise.

"It works!" shouted Gabriel. "Listen to that beautiful static."

A few moments later we heard the half-garbled voice of Admiral Fernandez. "Are you listening, are you listening?" he kept saying. "We've been trying to contact you for two days. Your voice was cut off on Wednesday. Now I'm getting a clicking sound from your transmitter."

I shouted into our microphone, but apparently all he heard was the clicking.

"If you hear me," said Fernandez, "disconnect the main transmitter coil and use it like a telegrapher's contact signal."

I followed his instructions, holding the tip of the coil close to the contact screw, waiting for his next order.

"Okay," he said, "apparently you hear me. Now make three long clicks."

"Cliiick cliiick cliiick."

"That's fine. Now remember that a long click is 'yes' and two short clicks are 'no.' I'm going to ask you specific questions. Answer yes or no. Are you making twenty to thirty miles per day?"

"Click click." (No.)

"Are you going faster?"

"Cliiick." (Yes.)

"Are you going more than fifty miles?"

"Cliiick."

"More than one hundred?"

"Cliiick."

"Between a hundred twenty and a hundred thirty miles?"

"Cliiick."

Fernandez then got specific data regarding our position, approximate direction, the speed of the current, the amount of food and water on board, and our health. He promised to contact a ham operator in Australia and teach him our system. "You will be much closer to him. The signals will be clearer."

I knew, however, that he would make every effort to remain the key man in our communications setup.

Our system almost went awry a few days later. While I operated the radio, Normand usually watched the generator, taking it outside the cabin so its noise wouldn't interfere with my hearing. On this particular afternoon he was perched on the starboard log, with the small motor resting on his lap, when a huge wave knocked him overboard. Clutching the motor to his stomach like a fullback, Normand grabbed a rope with his free hand. Gabriel scrambled across the deck and snatched the motor with one hand, pulling Normand aboard with the other.

"That's a great act," I said. "In and out of the water in ten seconds flat."

"We'll charge admission next time," said Gabriel. "Sorry about breaking the no-touch rule, though," he added jokingly.

"That doesn't apply in emergencies," I said.

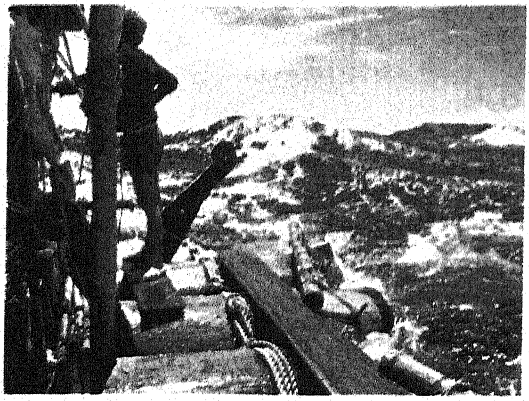
At the beginning it had not been easy to observe our rule of no physical contact. We were all *Latinos*, accustomed to touching people during conversation, to greeting friends, male or female, with affectionate *abrazos*. But now we were acquiring a reserve more characteristic of Englishmen. I began to feel so comfortable in my self-imposed bubble of privacy that I wondered if I would ever recover my penchant for demonstrative affection.

But there were other conditions to which we could never become reconciled. The ants seemed to grow more numerous every day. Sometimes I prayed for a hurricane that would wash them away.

One evening early in September, as we were approaching the

islands of Samoa, the gods apparently decided to respond. The sunset had been startlingly beautiful, an ocher and tangerine splash of color illuminating a vast tumult of clouds drifting across the horizon. The sea itself was like a rippling flame that cast a warm glow over us. But as the colors faded the clouds looked menacing, and the water became ominously dark and choppy.

Then suddenly the winds came up, whipping our sail around and slashing it against our heads as we hastily pulled it in. "Grab your ropes!" I yelled, as a fifteen-foot wave sent the raft hurtling along on the foamy crest. "Tie yourselves to—"



Astern of *La Balsa*, rising seas warn of a coming storm.

A second wave deluged us before I could finish. My crewmates had already secured themselves, and I quickly grabbed a rope to do the same. But before I could reach the mast a huge wall of water caught us broadside, crashing over the cabin and slamming me to the deck. Dazed and stunned, I managed to grab the mast as an even larger wave gushed through the cabin doorway and spilled out the windows, carrying a sleeping bag with it.

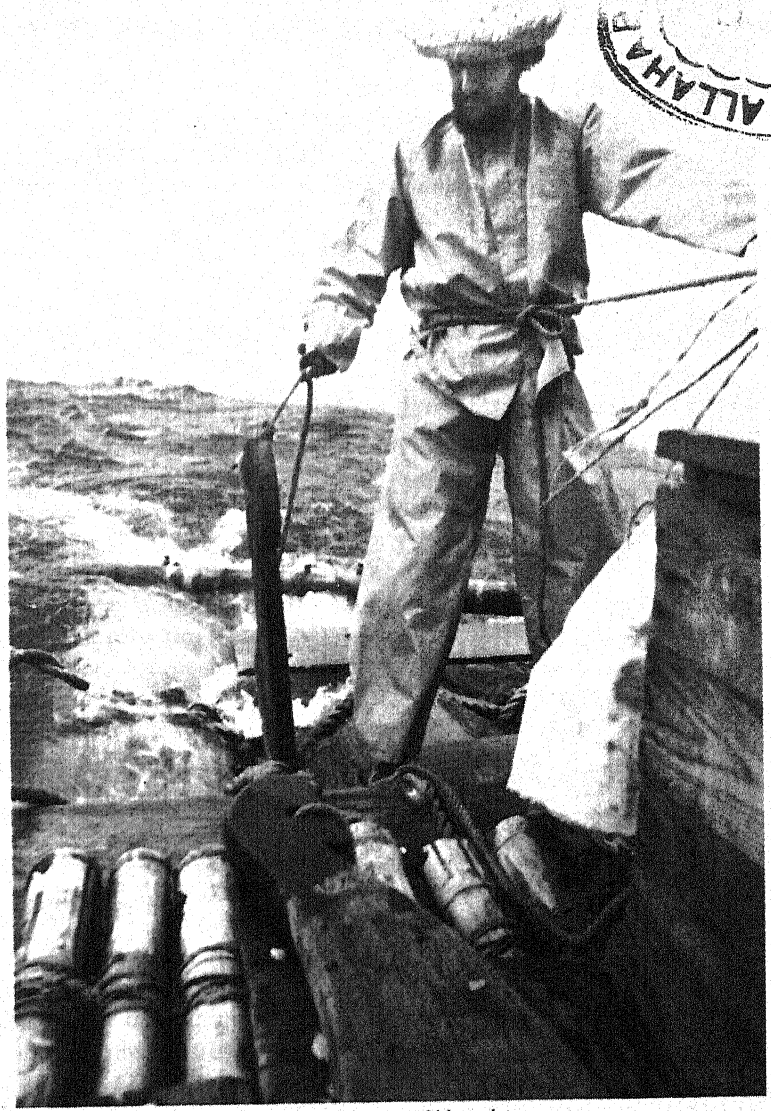
We were like blind men in a house of horrors, not knowing where the next assault would come from. Tossed in all directions, we clung to the mast and crossbeams like frightened crabs, and attempted feeble jokes to keep up our courage.

"The gods heard you, Vital," shouted Gabriel. "Three ants went overboard with that last wave."

"They didn't go overboard," I said, between mouthfuls of salt water. "I swallowed them."

Finally, after two hours of relentless punishment, the winds subsided, leaving us numb with exhaustion.

The next morning we surveyed the results. The deck and cabin



Wearing oilskins and secured by a rope around his waist, Vital adjusts a *guara* in rough seas.

were a shambles of water-soaked debris—Marc's torn sleeping bag hung limply from a crossbeam, my tattered shorts flopped over the portable stove, and a shredded red shirt was wrapped around the starboard log like a blood-soaked bandage. Our radio cable was tangled around the damaged boom, and bamboo splinters jutted from the cabin roof like stubborn cowlicks on a schoolboy.

"It could have been worse," I said, falling back on that cliché.

"I'm afraid it *will* be," cautioned Marc. "We're coming into the cyclone zone."

We had known this all along—Admiral Fernandez had clearly marked the climate changes on our map—but that baptismal night storm was a most emphatic reminder of the dangers ahead.

Two more squalls assaulted us before we reached Samoa. During a few sunny interludes we tightened the beams of our wobbly cabin, repaired the splintered boom, and washed and dried our sun-faded shirts and pants. We were down to twelve pieces of laundry: four shirts, four pairs of pants, and four sleeping bags. But since we spent most of the time in the nude, except for loincloths, our clothing needs were minimal.

At sunrise on September 12 we sighted the green-tipped fringe of the 60-mile-long Samoan island of Savaii—the first land we had seen since passing the Galápagos Islands more than thirteen weeks before. Marc, Gabriel, and I shouted, "Saaamoooaaa! Saaamooooaaa!" while Normand contented himself with a bubbling "Oh booooy!"

Through our only pair of binoculars, we could see the spire of a neo-Gothic church, surrounded by glittering green palm trees. We visualized beautiful girls in sarongs dancing on the beach.

"The girls will be fully dressed and Christianized," said Marc. "Anyway, you won't see them."

"Why not?" asked Gabriel.

"Because there's a reef between us and them. We've got to stay clear."

Momentarily dejected, Gabriel looked longingly at the fertile beauty of the island. "Maybe there's an opening in the reef."

"Maybe," I said. "The maps can't show everything."

As we drifted along Savaii it was a tantalizing sight, with tall

coconut palms gently bending in the breeze, multicolored birds flitting among the trees, the white-capped surf swelling toward sandy beaches. At midday we were even with the church, a jagged reef partially obscuring the lower half.

Then the wind changed, carrying us too close to the reef for comfort. We pulled in the sail, but continued to drift closer. I scanned the water for the telltale sign of foamy surf beating against the reef, which here lay submerged like a waiting trap. However, the only surf I saw was washing against the distant coastal beaches.

By sunset we were about three miles offshore, still drifting southwest toward the island. Flickering lights and gentle spirals of woodsmoke appeared along the shore.

"Smell that cooking," said Gabriel hungrily.

"That's only your imagination," said Marc. "The wind is blowing the other way. You're smelling the fish in this pan."

"Why don't we signal them?" suggested Gabriel. "Perhaps they'll come out and tell us about the reefs, Vital."

Marc fired two flares. A half hour later we saw a motor launch coming our way. There were three men on board, a New Zealander and two Samoans; they assured us the wind would be changing soon. I asked if they could possibly bring us some fruit.

"It might be too late to go ashore and come back again," said the New Zealander. "Why don't you let us tow you ashore, and you can get all you want. I'm sure these good people would love to see you. They're very kind—and curious."

"How about reefs?" I asked.

"None between you and the bay," he said.

Yielding to smiling, soft-spoken pressure from the Samoans, we agreed to go into the bay for an hour or two. We hadn't reckoned on the extent of the hospitality. The moment we reached shallow water a laughing swarm of people, mostly women, climbed onto the raft and poked into every corner, peering into the cabin, stooping down for a close look at the rope grooves, frightening Minet into hiding.

"Please! Please!" I yelled at last. "We're very tired. We have to sleep a little."

Most of the women were so striking that Gabriel was stunned into silence. Later he recovered enough to say, "Someday I'm going to come back here and get better acquainted with them."

We were finally left alone about 3:00 a.m., more exhausted than if we'd been through a storm. Taking the night watch, I told Marc we should leave as soon as we got a proper wind. But early morning visitors came before the hoped-for winds and brought us piles of fruit and hot food. After greedily devouring the native dishes, we waved good-by to our friends and continued our journey.

Minet had come out of hiding and was playing with some crabs near the stern, faking a hurt meow whenever one of them snapped at his paws. We were so fascinated by his ham acting that none of us noticed hovering over us a large hook-billed albatross with a wingspread of seven or eight feet and clumsy webbed feet.

Catching us unawares, it swooped down like a shadow and grabbed Minet in its beak. Thrown off-balance by its squirming prey, the albatross tried to continue its flight. When they were about seven feet in the air, Minet twisted furiously and forced his kidnapper to drop him just behind the cabin.

"Assassin," screamed Gabriel, running toward Minet, who had, in true cat fashion, landed on his feet. "I'll kill that bird!"

There was a large gash in Minet's neck; a two-inch hunk of fur had been ripped off, but he seemed more angry than injured.

"I'm glad he had webbed feet," said Marc, inspecting the wound. "If he had had claws like an eagle or a hawk, Minet would be done for. He was just too heavy for the bird's beak."

We wiped the wound clean, applied an antiseptic, and gently wrapped a bandage around Minet's neck. But in a few hours he had clawed the bandage to shreds.

Marc found a solution. "Let's put gauze mittens on his paws," he suggested, "or that wound will never heal."

So with four puffy gauze feet and a ruff around his neck, Minet crept about the deck, occasionally licking one mitten and washing his face and body with the tongue-wet gauze. Somehow, it never occurred to him to rip off the foot bandages with his teeth.

"That would ruin his act," observed Marc when I mentioned it. "Minet is too much of a ham to spoil a good comedy."

6

ALTHOUGH we were well over two-thirds of the way to Australia, most of the dangerous reefs and banks were still ahead of us, as were the heavy storms. Now we would have to steer our way past ten major reef barriers, nine of them, according to our calculations, by night. If my navigation was faulty, the first we would know about it might be a terrible crash in the dark.

We had wanted to come down in latitude after leaving Savaii, but a stiff south wind on the afternoon of September 15 kept us going northwest. Blowing stronger and stronger as the day wore on, creating waves twenty feet high, the wind threatened to push us toward the dangerous Pasco Bank, less than sixty miles ahead.

But suddenly we had more immediate worries. On our radio (still receiving but not transmitting) we got a report from a New Zealand meteorologist, predicting winds of forty-five to fifty miles an hour. Yelling "Batten down the hatches," I sealed the radio in plastic bags and lashed it to the ceiling of the cabin, while Gabriel pulled in the sail and Marc and Normand secured various other items. Just before sunset heavy clouds gathered, and a long moaning wind came out of the east. As its velocity increased, it started to screech. The sound chilled me to the bone, reminding me of the *lloronas* I'd been told about as a child, demented witches running through the night with bloodcurdling screams.

"I've never heard such strange winds," said Gabriel.

They were now blowing at full gale force, up to fifty miles per hour, pushing waves more than thirty feet high and whirling *La Balsa* around like a matchbox. The waves made a strange whirring sound.

"That's the bigger waves curling in on themselves," shouted Marc. "The big ones don't break—they curl inside like a wheel."

Thinking it might be safer than outside, we crawled into our fragile cabin. All we could see through the doorway was the gush of waves, slashing at us from all directions, turning the raft with a slapping up-and-down motion that bounced us around like loose dice. The cabin floor would tilt forty-five degrees, first sliding us

into a helpless heap against one wall, then slamming us against the opposite wall as huge masses of water poured through the doorway and out the windows, drenching us again and again.

At one point an enormous wave hurtled through the portside window and smashed Marc's head against the radio. His mouth opened in a soundless scream, then he crumpled to the floor.

"Marc!" I yelled, reaching for him in a sudden rush of fear.

To my great relief, he'd only been knocked unconscious, but it took me some minutes to revive him. Finally, he shook his head groggily. "Where am I?"

"On *La Balsa,*" I said. "You were knocked out by a wave."

He pondered my answer for a moment. Then his eyes cleared, and he gripped a corner beam for support. To my shouted "All right?" he nodded a vigorous affirmative.

By some miracle our bamboo cabin held fast, bending with each fierce gust of wind, straining at the ropes that held it together. No modern cabin would have withstood such pressure—not even a conventional metal structure.

An hour or so before sunrise, the storm subsided to a mild uproar, and we were able to determine the damage. "The boom has split again," said Marc, running his hand over a previous crack that he had bound with heavy rope. "But it's not a new crack, thank God." He moved more slowly than usual; obviously, he had not totally recovered from the blow on the head.

Two supply boxes were splintered, the bamboo deck mats badly shredded, and banana leaves ripped off the cabin roof. Minor debris was everywhere, and scores of walleyed sardines flapped between exposed logs. Inside the cabin our water-soaked sleeping bags smelled worse than ever.

"Time for spring housecleaning," said Gabriel.

"It's mid-September," I reminded him.

"I know that," he answered. "But this is the southern hemisphere. And it's springtime here."

Occupied with such trivia that day, we found it easier to ignore the ominous gray clouds coming from the east. We housecleaned our raft as it roller-coasted from one wave to another, and we kept a wary eye on the horizon.

The second gale struck us a few hours after sundown. Once again the waves swelled to heights of up to fifty feet. With water rushing in and out of our cabin, we tried to joke our way through the night. We laughed—at times maniacally, the way people laugh when they're dead tired or terribly frightened, though I can honestly say that I had gone beyond the point of fear. I felt the danger, yes, but also a conviction that we would pass this awful test, that our journey would be meaningless otherwise, that perhaps Saint Francis himself had sent these winds.

"Chisco," I said half aloud, "you're a true rascal."

"Are you talking to that saint again?" asked Gabriel.

"Thanking him," I answered, "for this fine storm."

Gabriel was sure the winds had driven me crazy.

In our preoccupation with the storm, nobody noticed that Minet had disappeared. It was Marc who first asked about him.

"Normand has him," said Gabriel, unable to see in the dark.

"No, *you* have him," said Normand.

Gabriel jumped up, calling "Minet! Minet!" as he staggered through an incoming mass of water at the doorway.

"Grab him, Vital," called Marc. "He'll be washed overboard!"

Yanking with all my strength, I managed to get Gabriel back, with Normand's help. "Minet will be all right," said Marc with as much conviction as possible. "He's a tough cat."

But Gabriel wouldn't be consoled. "He's drowned," he said, making his way back to his corner. He said no more for the rest of the night, but we knew he was miserable. I too felt sad.

The gale was gone before dawn, and an eerie calm greeted us when we went outside at daybreak. As I stood there, accustoming myself to the sudden quiet, I heard an anxious meow. Minet was clinging to one of the slanting mast posts, his limbs wrapped around it like those of a baby bear on a tree.

"Minet! Minet!" yelled Gabriel. "Come down."

But Minet was too frightened or too exhausted to move. So Gabriel shinnied up the pole and brought him down, tears welling in his eyes. Forgetting our fatigue, we cheered and laughed and caressed our tenacious little mascot. He had proved himself an awfully tough *hombre.*

The storm came back at midafternoon. Marc was tossed overboard shortly after he assumed his regular watch at 6:00 p.m. He had been nervous and tired following his concussion, and his fingers were blistered from tightening the knots on our cabin. Consequently, when the raft lurched abruptly, he lost his grip on the starboard *guara* and tumbled backward off the stern, yelling "*À l'aide!*" Normand and I quickly pulled him in by the rope around his waist, straining every muscle in our weary arms.

I realized I should have insisted (rather than merely urged) that he let one of us take over his watch. "Marc," I said, "as captain of this ship I must order you to quarters. We can't afford a tired chief cook. You're liable to poison us."

He smiled, and crawled into the cabin for whatever rest was possible on that miserable choppy sea.

My reference to his cooking was ironic, for none of us did any cooking during those three days of stormy weather. We subsisted on what remained of the fresh fruit and native bread we had gotten at Savaii. How we yearned for fried, or even raw, fish.

Aside from the hunger, we all felt an enormous weariness, a soreness in every muscle of our bodies, and, like Marc, our hands were swollen and cut from handling the ropes. The cordage, as one might expect in such volatile weather, would be slack one minute, then tight enough to snap a few minutes later.

On September 18 we finally got a spell of good weather, enabling me to get a fix on our latitude and longitude. The storm, I discovered, had been pushing us northwest, toward an area clotted with banks, but we had apparently skirted Pasco Bank on the night of September 15. Now we were safely bypassing Isabella Bank, another treacherous reef. It was strange to see Spanish names way out here in the middle of the South Pacific. We Spaniards had dropped names everywhere.

I wanted us to come down as close as we could to the northern coasts of Vanua Levu and Viti Levu, two of the principal Fiji Islands, then head south, and finally west, so as to pass south of New Caledonia. My intention was to avoid the New Hebrides, a chain of volcanic islands between the Fijis and New Caledonia, some four hundred miles long, and a nightmare even for vessels

with sophisticated navigation instruments. There would be fewer islands and reefs this way, and we would also miss Australia's famous Great Barrier Reef.

We had now been some fifteen weeks on the high seas and had acquired a new kind of courage, the cool, tested-by-fire courage of the seasoned matador, as opposed to the defiant courage of a young *novillero* who is still trying to convince himself that he's not afraid of bulls. Like good matadors we were trying to maintain that "grace under pressure" which Ernest Hemingway described so well.

Marc responded to my Hispanic analogy with typical Gallic skepticism. "But you've got to remember," he said, "that even Manolete finally met a Miura." (The famous matador Manolete was killed in 1947 by a bull from the Miura ranch, which reputedly raised the most dangerous bulls in Spain.)

"Then we shall die like Manolete," I said. "And with grace, I hope."

As my log indicates, the next few days were free of actual danger, but we seemed to be headed for serious trouble.

September 23:

We have come down a few degrees in latitude, but not enough. A rather stiff current pushes us west. The navigation chart indicates this current goes south at half a knot, but for us it is going west at two and a half knots. I don't like it.

October 1:

To clear the southern tip of New Caledonia we will need a course of 200 degrees, and to do this we need a wind from the east or northeast—*not the south wind that blows today!*

We cry against the Devil, against God, and against nature! And where is Chisco now that we need him?

NORMAND had spent several hours trying to catch a large swordfish which had been trailing us since daybreak. It would dive and swoop under *La Balsa*, its seven-foot sword piercing the water with menacing speed. Then it would churn and thrash about like a playful dolphin. "He won't take my bait," Normand said.

AGRICULTURA

"He's not hungry enough," I said. "Though he soon will be, with all that thrashing around."

Eventually it snagged Normand's bait without touching the hook itself. But as the swordfish turned away from us, a huge gray shark torpedoed out of the depths and chomped off its tail in one fierce bite. Mortally wounded, the swordfish was soon devoured in a bloody turmoil just below the surface.

"There goes our dinner," said Normand glumly.

"How about some shark meat?" suggested Marc. "Plenty of nice fillets out there."

"Not today. That killer's too big. I couldn't handle him."

I knew what Normand meant: our lack of sleep and nourishment during the three-day storm had weakened us. The sharks we had caught were generally six to ten feet long. Tough-skinned and muscular, they were difficult to slice. Some were covered with remoras, black slippery fish that fastened themselves to the larger fish by means of a vacuum disk on top of their flat heads.

Strangely enough, Minet showed no interest in the remoras; perhaps he was repelled by them. But his fascination with crabs finally got him in trouble. One afternoon he was batting at a large crab Normand had caught, when suddenly the crab snared Minet's left forepaw in one of its large claws. He let out loud meows as he scrambled around the deck, slapping it with his free paw in a vain attempt to break the viselike grip. Finally Normand chopped off the crab's claw and pried it loose.

"Minet," he said, "you're a damned fool."

Apparently chagrined, Minet disappeared from sight, and all we could hear was an occasional faint meow coming from somewhere behind the cabin. "He's punishing us," said Marc. "He's hiding, hoping we'll think he's gone or dead."

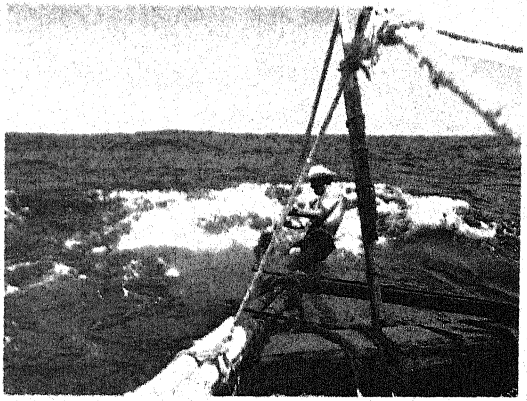
He continued to punish us for several hours, but as the sun began to set he left his hiding place and strutted up and down the deck. "Don't laugh," I said with a straight face. "Or he'll go into hiding again."

We wouldn't have had time for an encore of Minet's act; another storm was brewing. We barely had time to haul in the sail before the stronger winds came, rattling the boom against the

mast. We bounced around for several hours in the darkness, listening to a symphony of different sounds as the escalating winds twanged on the taut ropes. (When the thin ropes vibrated in high pitch, you knew the wind was strong; when the half-inch ropes *thummmed*, the wind was very strong; and when you heard the inch-and-a-half ropes *thooong-g-g* like a giant bass viol, it was time to batten the hatches.) Bracing our legs for the onslaught of waves, we could feel the logs jostling up and down beneath our feet like piano keys rhythmically accommodating the rumbling seas.

"Let's keep the watch all night," Gabriel suggested to me. "The other two need a rest—especially Marc."

"Good idea," I said, noting that the squall was already subsiding.



Framed against an expanse of ocean, a crew member checks *La Balsa*'s rigging.

In the morning Marc and Normand crawled out of the cabin to relieve us. "Why didn't you call us?" scolded Marc. We happily accepted his grumpiness.

"We're going to have a great dinner tonight," Gabriel predicted before falling into deep slumber. "Marc looks like a new man."

At midafternoon the next day Marc told us he was feeling much better, but that the raft was in failing health. "The logs seem looser, Vital. All these storms have stretched the ropes and made the grooves deeper."

We checked, and found that the ropes had indeed carved much deeper into the balsa wood, accounting for some looseness between the seven main logs. This was cause for considerable worry as we headed on our zigzag course through the dangerous reefs ahead. A tight firm raft would have been far easier to maneuver.

On October 5 we realized that we wouldn't be able to pass south of New Caledonia, so I decided to steer between the islands

of Eromanga and Tana in the southern New Hebrides. "That passage will be narrow and dangerous," I explained to Gabriel, who had been studying the maps with me. "There are all kinds of uncharted reefs there."

We stood at the prow of our little raft as it bounced and dipped toward the lowering sun, searching for some sign of the two islands we had to pass between. The sunset was beautiful that afternoon, fluffy flame-tinted clouds escorting a bright orange disk beyond the horizon. I could have sworn the earth was flat, that the sun was falling off the edge into endless space. But when it was gone, we had not seen a trace of Eromanga or Tana, and the wind was beginning to shift.

"Damn it, Chisco," I muttered. "We'll be sailing blind. Why must we always face these dangers at night?"

None of us could sleep—we all stood watch. Marc and I stood at the corners of the bow, peering into the darkness. Normand and Gabriel were stationed at the stern, alternating turns at the starboard *guara*, prepared to shift course if necessary. Near midnight I thought I saw a splash against a dark reef, but it was only a shark's dorsal fin cutting a foamy circle around the raft. He was soon joined by another. They trailed us for hours, like vultures.

"Eromanga and Tana," mused Marc. "Are you sure they exist?"

"They do on my map," I said.

Just after daybreak Gabriel verified the existence of Eromanga. Pointing to the tip of an island on the horizon behind us and slightly northeast, he said, "Look, we passed it last night." Tana, behind us to the southeast, was not even visible.

Late in the afternoon of the following day we skirted the northern fringe of the famous Astrolabe Reefs, coming close enough to see the jagged coral blocks jutting from the waves for several miles. I studied part of a submerged reef through my powerful binoculars. It looked like an immense rock garden dotted with anemones and branches of coral, having the appearance of fossilized plants in purple, yellow, green, and red; there were dark green mosses here and there, prickly objects that resembled cacti, and fish of all sizes, shapes, and colors—a fantasy of strange flora and fauna that only the sea can provide.

"Now we'll have to go northwest of the D'Entrecasteaux Reefs and Huon Islands," I told Gabriel. "That ought to test the raft. It's one of the trickiest seas in the world."

On the evening of October 10 we contacted Rafael Corcuera. Using our time-consuming click-click system, we told him our approximate position, not knowing we were less than nine miles from the dreaded D'Entrecasteaux Reefs.

Then, as we were signing off, I heard the voice of a New Zealand ham operator named Gus. He was talking to Rafael, but we could hear him quite clearly. "They're in danger!" he said. "They're headed straight for the reefs."

Then Admiral Fernandez's voice broke in. "New Zealand, New Zealand, I agree with you. . . . They are in great danger. . . . The wind is from the east and pushing them hard toward the reefs. . . . We've got to warn them. . . . Their radio is out. . . . Can you have a plane sent?"

It was already quite dark when we heard the urgent plea from Mexico City. Once again we were headed for a possible disaster in the moonless night. We spent another sleepless ten hours standing watch.

But by daybreak the D'Entrecasteaux Reefs were far behind us, barely visible through our binoculars.

Around 11:00 a.m. we heard a small plane in the vicinity of the reefs. Five hours later, when we again made contact with our ham-radio network, I heard a voice say, "The plane didn't find anything, so I think they made it okay. If they had hit a reef, there would have been some wreckage."

I tried to reassure them, but they were apparently unable to hear my clicking from the not-too-reliable transmitter. After a half hour of futile tampering, I went back to my navigation charts to ascertain our next move.

October 12:

We have passed the Huon Islands and their reefs—again during the night. Incredible! I think somebody is pushing us. I can no longer sleep at night. I'm afraid to be awakened by the crunching of the raft against a reef.

The wind is from the east, but we cannot go south as far as we

would like because the current is flowing due west. We would like to go almost due south so as to miss Chesterfield Reefs and Islands, which are between 5 and 17 feet high.

At night we would have to be within half a mile of a reef to see the surf breaking on it, and by then it would probably be too late for a raft with no motor to change course. With each new test, however, we became prouder of our raft's performance.

October 13:

No wind today. We can rest and let the small current take us south from the Huon Islands. We sang songs all afternoon, ate a fine lunch of flying fish prepared by Marc, played Parcheesi for high stakes.

Gabriel says, "We are lucky for once." And Marc says, "If we are lucky now, I am afraid of what will happen tomorrow."

Marc was right, but it would be a trouble different from the kind he expected.

7

On the following day we drifted into a dead sea again. There was no current and no breeze. The sun was unbearably hot, forcing us to seek the meager shade of the cabin. Nothing seemed to be moving except a few cockroaches and ants.

There were no fish anywhere; they had disappeared along with the current. So we had fish from the day before, eating it raw so as not to produce additional heat from the stove. It tasted warm and bitter. Neither Marc nor I could eat it, but Normand and Gabriel chewed the tough pieces with a stubborn, joyless determination, as if this were their last meal.

Sunset brought some relief from the heat, but there was still no breeze. Nor was there the following morning. My sextant indicated that we had moved less than a mile in twenty-four hours.

Finally, just after the burning sun slipped over the horizon, we got a gentle breeze from the north. Two hours later we drifted into a southerly current, and the increasing wind pushed us along at a comfortable five miles an hour. We sang "La Cucaracha" and

"La Marseillaise," our voices tumbling over one another like carefree waves.

The next few days were almost perfect, as we headed for a passage north of the Chesterfield Reefs. "We're less than seven hundred miles from Australia," I told Marc, after checking our position on my sextant. "And the raft is still in fine shape."

"A bit loose here and there," said Marc, "and needs a shave."

The ragged beards of seaweed had grown up again on the outside logs.

"We ought to take some pictures before we cut them off," said Gabriel.

Gabriel and I hopped into the dinghy and rowed for several hundred yards. From that distance *La Balsa* looked terribly fragile and primitive, and I thought how little we had realized the extent of the dangers or the meagerness of our protection.

"I've been thinking about that last big gale," mused Gabriel, as if reading my thoughts. "It was worse than I imagined."

"How so?" I asked.

"I don't know how to say it exactly. It's just a funny feeling I got a minute ago, a strange sort of cold chill when I looked at the raft. Silly, I guess."

"We all get that," I said. "It's called shell shock. A soldier convinces himself that he's not scared when the bombs are exploding all around him, but the fear comes back later on."

We started snapping pictures of the raft, Gabriel rowing while I worked the camera, and vice versa. There was a comic elegance about *La Balsa* as we came closer, a sort of quixotic flair in the billowing sail that contrasted with the shabbiness of the cabin. I felt that the legendary man of la Mancha would have been proud to sail on our little raft.

"She's the most beautiful raft in the world," said Gabriel.

I had to agree. It was a good little craft and had held up through remarkably severe conditions. Nevertheless, I couldn't help fretting about the looseness Marc and I had detected. I especially worried at night. Lying there in the cabin, I could feel the logs jostling, as if the ropes were wearing away. Even the *guaras* had become slightly wobbly, making it more difficult to

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steer through narrow passages. Would the raft suddenly disintegrate as we were approaching the Chesterfield Reefs, or would it wait until we got to the more dangerous Great Barrier Reef?

"WE MUST be near an island," Gabriel said one day, nodding toward the distant funnel-shaped cloud in front of us.

"It must be the Chesterfield Reefs," I said, studying my chart. I quickly calculated how long it would take us to reach them, and concluded we would have to pass them in the dark.

Once again we stood an all-night vigil, but detected no slashing of waves that might indicate invisible reefs. According to my calculations, however, we must have passed the first of the Chesterfield Reefs around midnight, and the last just before dawn. We were elated when we got a strong morning wind from the east which, combined with a southerly current, would carry us in a southwest direction.

The next few days and nights were spent on a zigzag course through other reefs. Some, not even charted, were lying just below the surface—particularly dangerous for minor craft without radar.

"*La Balsa* has its own radar," observed Marc as we twisted through a jagged mass of coral five feet below the surface. "I think she uses the seaweed on her belly as antenna."

Minet, like other sea cats, had also developed an internal radar, enabling him to anticipate bad weather long before it developed. The sky would be clear, but suddenly he would creep into a corner of the cabin. Several hours later a squall would come, surprising everyone but Minet. My log testified to this.

October 26:

Minet was right again about the weather yesterday. It suddenly rained like hell.

Today we heard for the first time a ham operator in Sydney named Sid Molen. This makes Australia seem much closer. He has a strong voice, and is very brief and practical.

Now we were headed for the Great Barrier Reef, one of the most dangerous areas in the world for any kind of vessel. With Marc peering over my shoulder, I spread our chart on the matted

deck and studied the jagged profile of the immensely long reef, searching for a possible passage at high tide.

"This light-shaded area might be an opening," I said, with more hope than conviction.

"I doubt it," Marc responded. "I've been told that there are no safe passages. We'd better prepare for a crash."

"There's still one possibility," I said, pointing to some wavy lines on the chart. "There's a current that runs south along the eastern face of the reef. We might have a fifteen percent chance of drifting with it."

Marc smiled. "How did you reach that precise calculation?"

"Very simply," I answered. "Thirty percent is a fair chance. I figure we only have about half a fair chance."

Once again I felt like a matador on the morning of an important bullfight, wondering how the bulls would behave at four o'clock. Perhaps the Great Barrier Reef would be like the Miura bull that killed Manolete.

The sky darkened before we could get within sight of the reef, and the wind switched from east to south-southeast. Normand had gone up to the crow's nest to scan the horizon with the binoculars, but could see nothing but the amber afterglow of sunset on the choppy waves. Marc and Gabriel were at the boom, trying to swing the sail just enough to change our course without losing the wind. Finally, when it was too dark to see farther than three hundred feet, I told them to take in the sail.

"We're liable to hit that reef before we see it," I said, holding the compass close to my eyes. "We'd better slow down and drift awhile. I hope the current is strong enough to save us."

But even with the sail down, the wind kept pushing us to the west. Having tied down everything in preparation for a crash, there was nothing to do but pray for a miracle. "Call your saint, Vital," said Gabriel. "We need him." There was no jest in his voice, only the fervor of a determined but ambivalent atheist.

We all stood at the bow, peering into the darkness, each one lost in his own thoughts. Had we come all this distance—nearly eight thousand miles through the worst obstacles—simply to fail on the last lap?

It wasn't my nature to accept defeat gracefully. Chisco! I yelled inwardly, not wanting to show my desperation to the others. Give us a fair chance. Not a miracle, damn it—just a fair chance.

We kept drifting closer to the dreaded reef, bracing ourselves for the collision, straining our eyes for the white-capped lashing of waves against the invisible barrier. The sea became choppier and darker as the moon drifted behind a bank of clouds, and the tension on board mounted with each passing minute.

Then suddenly the wind died down. "We're awfully close," said Marc. "I can hear the surf beating against the barrier. I can also see spray," he added. "Over there, to your right. About three hundred yards away."

Sure enough—it was to my right! We had turned somehow. We were drifting south now, with the reef on our starboard side. "We're in the current!" I shouted. "We're going to make it."

Shortly before midnight we got a fairly good wind from the north, which prompted us to hoist our sail again. As dawn crept over the eastern horizon, the reef emerged in a dazzling display of bright coral and multicolored plants.

By October 28 we were clear of the Great Barrier Reef and still moving south, with the last obstacle—the Saumarez Reefs—coming up to the southeast. We had a brisk wind and clear blue skies, a perfect day for fishing and sunbathing. Minet was perched on the cabin roof, watching Marc as he hauled in a wildly flapping dolphin. He waited until the first blood spurted, then leaped from the roof in one fluid motion and neatly lapped up the puddle at Marc's feet.

"Minet has developed better manners," observed Marc. "He doesn't slurp anymore."

"He's over five months old," I said. "He's maturing."

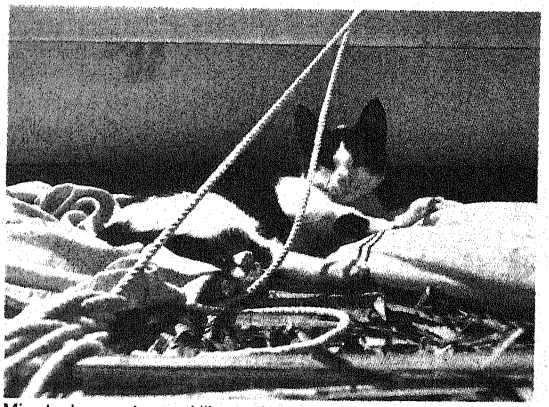
We were interrupted by Normand calling from the crow's nest. "I see a ship—a big red ship over there."

Looking through the binoculars, I saw a motionless ship. As we drew closer, I noticed a gaping hole in its side. I unfurled my navigation chart and saw a wreck symbol right on one of the Saumarez Reefs. As I later learned, we were looking at the wreck of the American Liberty ship *Francis Blair,* which had foundered on the

reef in 1942. Subsequently, it had been used for bombing practice by the RAF, which explained why it was painted red.

Checking my chart again, I said to Gabriel, "If this is the right wreck, then there should be some huge rocks visible at a hundred and twenty degrees southeast."

Sure enough, there were two slender rocks sticking up like sharks' fins about three miles away. Beyond them we could just make out the foamy white line of surf breaking on the reefs.



Minet—ham actor and "born delinquent"—catnaps by the dinghy.

"There's also a white line to our port side," said Normand. "And another one behind the ship."

"We're headed for trouble," I said to Marc.

Suddenly, we realized we were in the middle of an immense curving reef, and the wind was blowing us steadily toward the deadly white lines in the distance. Now I could see the rocks beneath us, about sixty feet below the surface.

"If we escape this one," Marc said, "we're damned lucky."

My feelings as we approached that first barely submerged coral formation were a mixture of cold fear and sheer delight at the incredible spectacle below. The water was a clear emerald green, the convoluted coral shimmered with the bright colors of an artist's palette, and thousands of fish darted in and out among dreamlike underwater plants. It was to be the most beautiful—and the most dangerous—moment of our entire voyage.

Angry waves were breaking on two big outcrops of coral half a mile apart. We zigzagged between them, sometimes missing a coral trap by less than three feet. From his perch in the crow's nest, Normand kept warning us that we were still heading for a white line of breakers.

Rushing back and forth between the four *guaras* behind the cabin, I would push down the starboard boards one moment, then pull them up ten seconds later as the raft veered toward a new reef. Meanwhile, Marc was running up and down in front of the cabin, frantically adjusting the forward *guaras* to coincide with my maneuvers. It was a kind of split-second acrobatics.

Suddenly we found ourselves in a pocket of reefs. "We're trapped," I told Marc. "We'll have to try that gap."

We steered toward a gap in the churning foam. As we came closer, we saw that the gap was barely wide enough for the raft, but it was too late to turn back. Here was the supreme test of *La Balsa*'s maneuverability. I shifted the starboard-stern centerboard about six inches to correct a slight list to the left. We started through the gap, catching a spillover of spray on both sides. Then we heard a loud grinding underneath us. A jolting crunch knocked us off our feet, as the *guaras* bumped over rocks and coral. Three *guaras* broke, but in a few more breathless and terrifying seconds we were over the reef and out into blue water.

We were on the last lap to Australia.

8

THE moment we cleared the Saumarez Reefs, Normand started singing his song at the top of his lungs. The rest of us joined in, laughing boisterously, relieving the tension. The only one who didn't enjoy our foolishness was Minet. He just sat twitching his whiskers, like a disapproving schoolmaster at noon recess.

"He feels left out," said Gabriel.

"But he used to meow when Normand sang, remember?"

His sudden silence disturbed us. But then, just before sunset, he snuggled into Gabriel's lap, purring softly. That night he kept the watch with me, never leaving my side for three hours, and when Normand relieved me around 3:00 a.m., Minet immediately climbed into his lap. He had obviously decided to stay up with anyone who was standing watch.

Then it dawned on me that our little cat was afraid to be alone. He had somehow sensed we were near journey's end and that we

would soon leave *La Balsa,* the only home he had ever known. My daily log reflects my continuing concern about our "fifth crew member."

October 30:

We have traveled south about 40 miles today, and we think we've reached the first Australian currents. Everyone is happy except Minet. He's still moping around like a child expecting to be abandoned by divorced parents.

Now our canasta score is: Marc, 1,617,380; Vital, 1,331,525; Normand, 1,268,905; Gabriel, 1,257,350. Though I hesitate to make judgments about comparative ability, I think we can assume that older codgers like Marc and me are more patient in such games than youngsters like Gabriel and Normand.

November 1:

We're picking up speed. We made 62 miles south today. We can safely say we're practically in Australia. Fraser Island is due west of us, although we can't see it. Our bad luck seems to be disappearing. I guess we left it behind us on the Saumarez Reefs.

On November 3, shortly before 3:00 p.m., we established contact with Sid Molen in Sydney. A senior television technician, Molen had been in radio contact with Rafael Corcuera for several months. On October 24 Rafael had asked him to take over the coordination of the raft's communication system, teaching him our click-click technique. Consequently, when Molen called us that afternoon, he had alerted ham operators in Queensland, Victoria, and New Guinea, all of whom were listening as he questioned us.

"Do you need urgent assistance? Is anyone sick?"

To which I answered with a "click click." (No.)

"Do you have enough food and water?"

"Cliiick." (Yes.)

"Would you like a ship to stand by?"

"Cliiick."

We hoped to land at Brisbane, and I wanted a boat standing by in case a wind threatened to blow us ashore. After 8000 miles, I didn't want our raft broken up in a crash landing.

"Can you wait until tomorrow?" asked Sid.

"Cliiick."

I gave him a fairly accurate longitude, but because of cloudy weather, I had not been able to gauge our latitude, so I gave him an approximation. As it turned out we were thirty-seven miles north of the position I reported to Sid. My mistake caused considerable confusion. On November 4 everyone believed we were farther south, headed for Brisbane, where Captain E. Whish, the Air-Sea Rescue Coordinator, was preparing to meet us.

At about 3:30 a.m. on November 5 Normand saw a light on the horizon, blinking every seven and a half seconds. Checking my chart with a flashlight, I identified it as the beacon light from Double Island Point, just south of Fraser Island.

When the sun came up three hours later, we saw the southern tip of Fraser Island, and I got out the radio and started clicking away. Our network of ham operators were all on the line in less than five minutes. When the information about our position was relayed to Captain Whish, he replied, "That's not possible, according to where they were yesterday."

We were asked: "Are you south of Danger Point?"

"Click click." (No.)

"All right, are you northeast of Double Island Point?"

"Cliiick, cliiick, cliiick." (Yes, yes, yes.)

"Okay, Vital, we're sending a plane to spot you right away!"

The first plane flew overhead at 9:20 a.m. and dropped a beer can with a message: "Welcome to Australia!" Then came another plane packed with journalists, followed by several others that buzzed over us like friendly bees.

Either frightened or resentful, Minet hid in the cabin, refusing to join the wild celebration we were staging on deck. After a while I crawled in and found him huddled in Gabriel's sleeping bag, meowing softly like a heartsick child. I held him in my lap, stroking his back and trying to console him.

Had Minet somehow realized that our raft family would soon break up? Obviously, he could go away with only one of us—and we all assumed it would be Gabriel. In any case, whether or not the little cat would actually miss us once he left the raft, we knew we would miss him. He had given all of us a profound lesson in

the art of survival against heavy odds, and he had defied all dangers with the élan of a soldier of fortune.

I took him outside to join his family, and they invited him to share the lunch Normand had cooked. As we sat down together, I noticed that Marc no longer disdained Normand's amateur cooking by lowering his jaw. I also noted that Gabriel was eating quietly, without his usual *craack* and *rassp*. It was the first pleasant meal I had eaten since leaving Guayaquil.

I thought of the many things we had proven on this voyage. We had shown that four men can live on a "floating prison" for more than five months without succumbing to the urge to kill. In fact, by carefully adhering to our two rules, we had managed to avoid even a serious dispute. A raft or boat on the high seas is really a small world unto itself. Each man must be responsible for the welfare of the whole group. Survival depends on the total cooperation of *all* men—whether their world is a raft, a village, a country, or a planet. The voyage of *La Balsa* had shown that such cooperation is possible.

Moreover, we had demonstrated that it was possible to navigate a raft with considerable accuracy, that one need not drift with the caprice of winds and currents. We had come through some of the most dangerous seas in the world and successfully maneuvered past nine treacherous reefs at night. We had also shown that a balsa raft of good female logs retains its buoyancy over long distances. Now, at the very end of our voyage, the logs sat only slightly more than one inch deeper in the water than they had in Guayaquil. Had we wanted to sail the raft back to South America, I was sure we could do so after tightening the ropes. The French raft explorer Eric de Bisschop, who died in 1958, believed there had been circular migration from Peru to Polynesia and back again to South America via west-to-east currents. Someday I may undertake that round trip myself.

These were my thoughts as we sailed the last few miles to Australia, accompanied by an escort of small planes and scores of pleasure craft. The people gave us fruit, candy, and beer, and asked hundreds of questions about the raft. We were headed for an area known as the Sunshine Coast. I was particularly fasci-

nated with the name of its port, Mooloolaba, a musical rolling of full vowels and soft consonants that spoke of mystery and beauty.

When we came into the estuary of the Mooloolah River, it was too dark for us to see any dangerous obstacles, so we agreed to let a motorboat tow us into port. Shortly before midnight we drew near the dock, which we could barely see through the darkness.

Then, suddenly, there was an explosion of light and noise. Skyrockets, Roman candles, blue flares, and all kinds of fireworks shot up from the docks, and hundreds of well-wishers shouted and cheered as *La Balsa* pulled into port: "Welcome to Australia!"

THE tumultuous welcome was soured when two quarantine officers boarded the raft and took Minet away in a metal cage. Australia has strict regulations on the importation of animals, but we hadn't expected their officials to arrive at midnight. We planned to spring Minet next day.

We left the anchored raft and climbed a wooden ladder at the end of the dock, telling each other how good it felt to be on land again. Crowds of people lined the dock, stepping back to form a passage for us. Waving to their welcoming shouts, I started walking through the gap. Then, suddenly, before I had taken even three or four steps, my legs buckled. Gabriel and Normand fell in a heap beside me, and Marc wobbled into the arms of two men. We were experiencing the punch-drunk effect that all sailors go through when they first step on *terra firma*. In fact, ours was worse, because the motions of a small raft are more exaggerated than those of a large vessel.

In spite of the wobbliness we shook hands with hundreds of men, women, and children, but we found it almost impossible to autograph the notebooks, slips of paper, menus, and napkins that were shoved into our hands. "I can't stand still," I kept telling them in my heavily accented English.

About an hour after our arrival I talked with my wife and two little daughters. Admiral Fernandez had arranged for them to greet me on his ham radio set. My wife, Denise, sounded wonderfully happy and excited, and my elder daughter, Marina, asked me to bring her a mama kangaroo "with a baby in her pocket." But

four-year-old Denise seemed subdued, perhaps confused by the complex dials and knobs on the admiral's transceiver. Suddenly I felt sad and guilty, a lump rising in my throat as I visualized her standing in front of a cold metal radio apparatus, trying to sound affectionate toward a long-absent father she couldn't see.

"Did you drown?" she finally asked.

"No, I'm still here, *mi corazón,*" I said. "Everyone's fine."

"Is the little kitty still there?" she asked.

"Yes, Minet's still with us."

"Bring him home, Daddy," she said with sudden enthusiasm.

I would have promised her the moon wrapped in cellophane, but our conversation was abruptly terminated by shrill static that stabbed my eardrums like an invisible knife.

About one in the morning we had a press conference at the crowded Mooloolaba Yacht Club. We felt less woozy as we sat on solid wooden chairs, facing a jumble of microphones and television cameras.

"How do you feel, Captain?"

"Tired and happy."

"Also hungry," added Gabriel, evoking a burst of laughter.

"Were you ever afraid?"

"Quite often," I said. "But I managed to hide it. Mostly from myself."

Later a local radio ham told me he'd just been contacted by Rafael Corcuera, who wished to congratulate us. Our conversation was lighthearted and friendly, yet I detected a strange note of sadness in Rafael's voice.

The next morning we arrived at the waterfront office of the Australian Quarantine Department at ten o'clock. Twenty or thirty reporters and television cameramen were there ahead of us, crowded into the gray-walled reception room, apparently hoping to photograph "the cat who had learned to swim among the sharks."

"We have come for the cat," I said to a pleasant-faced man behind the desk.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, nervously eyeing the red light on a TV camera. "She's got to stay in quarantine, you know."

"For how long?"

"Well, it will be thirty days, sir. She's got to be checked for communicable diseases. Same as all animals."

"Then what happens?" asked one of the reporters.

The official cleared his throat and shuffled some papers, his worried blue eyes avoiding ours. "I'd rather not say," he said.

"We want to know," I insisted, leaning across the desk.

"Well . . ." he said, with great reluctance, "I'm afraid she's got to be disposed of."

Everyone gasped—even the supposedly callous newsmen.

"You mean kill her?" yelled someone at the rear of the room.

A bedlam of angry protests broke out. Several police officers from the nearby immigration department rushed in to quiet the uproar, and the official disappeared into an interior office.

"We won't permit this!" shouted a woman reporter. "We'll raise hell with all of you."

Within a few hours the news had spread to every province and town in Australia. The wire services carried angry articles condemning the quarantine department and asking for new laws prohibiting the slaughter of innocent animals. Minet's picture appeared on front pages everywhere. The evening telecasts carried filmed coverage of our morning encounter at the waterfront. Vehement editorials demanded that the government release "the cat heroine who had survived the toughest sea journey in all recorded history."

"They keep referring to him as *her*," Gabriel observed.

"Minet sounds like a feminine name in English," I said. "But let's not correct them. A female cat arouses more sympathy."

She did indeed. Thousands of letters, mostly from women, poured in to newspaper and government offices—"save Minet"; "free the heroine"; "don't let her die"—a blizzard of protests that no government with any political sensitivity could afford to ignore. Within twenty-four hours several elected officials had asked the administration to reconsider its regulations. The next day a government spokesman announced that the "Minet matter" was under review by higher authorities.

Fortunately the government was spared further embarrass-

ment by the wife of a sea captain whose ship was about to sail from Brisbane. "I'll adopt Minet," she announced in a telegram that relieved the quarantine officials. "She'll find a home on the ship *Sued*, which will leave your country within five days."

Since we would be traveling through Australia, attending receptions for two or three weeks, we decided to let her have Minet, with the agreement that Gabriel would pick him up at some port along the *Sued*'s route. But when the captain's wife later informed Gabriel that Minet seemed "wonderfully happy" aboard the huge ocean liner, he reluctantly agreed to let him stay.

"That little cat is a born sailor," he subsequently wrote me. "I don't think he could adjust to Chile. And where would I get him enough blood to drink?"

After our "heroes' tour" of the major cities (our hands swollen from handshakes, our jaw muscles worn out from smiling), Marc, Normand, Gabriel, and I parted company. We had a farewell party on the raft, a boozy, sentimental affair that lasted until dawn. We talked about Minet and about all the dangers we had overcome, laughing and hugging each other as we discussed the difficulty of keeping my two rules.

"I wanted to punch you every time you cleared your throat, Vital," said Gabriel. "One afternoon—sometime in August—you cleared your throat twenty-nine times in a single hour! I counted."

Normand spoke up about the way Gabriel had *craack*ed and *rassp*ed, "finally forcing me to eat outside the cabin because I couldn't stand it anymore."

"I guess I was nervous," explained Gabriel rather sheepishly. "Anyway, I'm glad you didn't criticize me. I would have stopped eating altogether if I'd known how awful it sounded."

Marc grinned and slowly shook his head. "No, Gabriel, nothing could keep you from eating. I envy you your stomach, my friend—and also your ability to sleep when nobody else could. With that kind of gift, you can survive anything."

Thus praising and forgiving each other, we cemented a friendship that is rare—the profound comradeship of men who have traveled far and faced death together, thumbing their noses at the gods of chance.

Leaving Australia on a 707 jet two days later, after arranging for *La Balsa* to be shipped to my home in Spain, I looked down at the sparkling waters of the Pacific with affection and awe. Had we really crossed that huge mass of water in a primitive raft? It hardly seemed possible.

Stranger still was my reaction when the stewardess informed me that it would take us twenty-three hours to reach Mexico City. "Twenty-three hours!" I exclaimed, forgetting we had taken nearly six months to travel a shorter distance. "I'll get claustrophobia."

Even with the long stopover in Tahiti, I felt imprisoned inside the huge, almost empty jet. How I longed for the freedom of *La Balsa,* the nearness of the pulsating water, the friendly fish trailing behind us, the satisfaction of controlling one's own destiny.

When we landed in Mexico City the following day, my wife and children and several friends were waiting for me, and there were tears and laughter and warm embraces all around. But this stopover was brief. My wife and I had to board another plane almost immediately. The president of Ecuador, José María Velasco Ibarra, had invited us to a homecoming celebration in Guayaquil. Within a few hours we were reunited with such friends as Don Cesar Iglesias, Senora Paladines, Joe Megan, and the many Ecuadorians who had given us aid and comfort from the beginning.

Then we flew back to Mexico City. The next morning I took my little daughters to an amusement park to celebrate. Wearing bright new dresses, with saucy beribboned pigtails bouncing off their shoulders, they led me hand in hand from the merry-go-round to the scooter to the funhouse, and to several refreshment stands in between. But at the roller coaster I balked.

"It's too dangerous," I said.

"Mama takes us all the time," said Marina, squeezing my thumb in her tiny hand.

"She must be crazy," I said under my breath. "Only a fool would get on one of those deathtraps."

"What did you say, Papa?" asked Denise.

"Nothing," I said. "I was just thinking that we ought to take another ride on the merry-go-round."

They followed me without protest, but I distinctly heard Marina whisper to her sister, "I think Daddy's afraid."

Realizing they were too young to understand the difference between rational and irrational risks, I bribed them into silence with popcorn and cotton candy, and saved the lecture for my wife, who had just arrived to join us.

"There's nothing wrong with being afraid of roller coasters, Vital," she said, missing my point entirely. "Everyone has to be afraid of something. I hear that Manolete was afraid of cats."

The next day I made a quick round-trip flight to Guadalajara to visit Rafael Corcuera. Hoping to surprise him, I had not called him in advance. But when his wife answered the door, her expression told me that something tragic had happened.

"Rafael is dead," she said in a hushed voice, leading me into their modestly furnished living room. "He died just after you finished your voyage. He had been awfully sick for a long time, but he wouldn't let himself die until you had reached Australia."

She paused, touched her graying hair with trembling fingers, tears brimming in her dark brown eyes. "Your wonderful voyage kept him alive. He seemed to be sailing with you as he charted your progress day by day. He kept worrying about your water supply and about the terrible storms near Samoa. And when he heard of your emergency—when you were almost starving—he couldn't sleep for forty-eight hours. When your radio went dead, he would often stare at the map, mumbling, 'Where are my sons?' "

"He was very kind to us," I said, not wanting her to know that the "emergency" was simply a misunderstanding.

"We finally moved his bed down to the basement, where his radio was," Senora Corcuera continued. "He was too weak to climb up and down stairs." She took me down and showed me the log he had kept, and the much-marked maps. I felt a mingling of pride and sadness when I noticed how his writing had grown fainter toward the end.

"We loved your husband," I said, looking at the neatly folded covers on his bed. "And we always felt his presence. You might say he was the fifth man on *La Balsa*."

"Rafael would have been proud to hear you say that," she said

in a soft whisper. "And I'm grateful that you kept him alive as long as you did."

The following week, in Madrid, the Spanish government gave me an elaborate reception at General Francisco Franco's ornate palace. It was a splendid ceremony, and I was presented with a beautiful bronze medallion. But I couldn't help feeling a certain pity for General Franco. Here he was, surrounded by everything money could buy—exquisite tapestries, gleaming marble floors, oriental carpets, Etruscan vases, red velvet drapes, discreet servants to answer his slightest need. Yet it seemed like a gilded prison. He had no free access to that world that is most real to me. He could not take a solitary walk down a tree-lined avenue, or eat in one of those marvelous gypsy taverns on the Plaza Mayor. Like any other head of state, he had to be escorted everywhere by a bodyguard, having long ago sacrificed the precious privacy that even the most humble Spaniard enjoys.

"It must be wonderful to sail on a raft," he said to me. "How nice it would be to get away from all the humdrum problems of this world."

Had it been possible for him to use it, I would have given him *La Balsa* then and there. Instead, with his financial assistance, we established a sailors' museum in Santander, my hometown and that of Columbus's map maker, where *La Balsa* can remain on permanent display.

Perhaps it will encourage someone else to take up the challenge of the sea—as the Huancavilcas did—and sail freely toward the western sun.

The Balsa Fleet

By the time Condensed Books readers receive this volume Vital Alsar should once again be in mid-Pacific, sailing westward on a course about eight hundred miles to the south of *La Balsa*'s. His latest expedition, which left Ecuador in May, consists of three rafts—the other two skippered by Marc Modena and Gabriel Salas—and twelve men.

Alsar's purpose this time is twofold. He wants to test different currents, those "moving roads of the sea" which, he maintains, the ancient mariners knew as a modern motorist knows road maps; and to show that the original expeditions, directed perhaps toward trade or colonization, may have comprised small fleets of balsa rafts. If all goes well, his rafts will reach Mooloolaba, Australia, where *La Balsa* made her landfall, before the end of this year.

When not at sea, the thirty-nine-year-old Alsar shares a busy homelife with his young wife, Denise, who is one of Mexico's top classic Spanish dancers, and their two daughters. They live in a Spanish-style house in the quiet Mexico City suburb of Etchegaray, where the girls are in kindergarten and first grade. Their father, a physical fitness enthusiast, finds time, every day he's ashore, for two hours of swimming and Swedish gymnastics.

It takes Alsar about a year to recover from a long raft expedition, and another year to raise funds (estimated cost of the present voyage is $250,000) and prepare for the next one. Assuming that his current venture is successful, he expects to set out on a final journey—a circular trip from Ecuador, through Polynesia, and back again—sometime in 1975.



The ancient tomb
held unimaginable
riches, a dark secret
and the threat
of a terrible death

The SUNBIRD

A CONDENSATION OF THE BOOK BY

Wilbur Smith

ILLUSTRATED BY NEVILLE DEAR

Dr. Benjamin Kazin saw it for the first time as an indistinct outline on an aerial photograph. That faint, regular pattern might—just might—be the ancient Carthaginian city in southern Africa for which he had searched so long.

In his efforts to uncover its secrets, Kazin would risk the love of his beautiful assistant, Dr. Sally Benator; place his friend and patron Louren Sturvesant in mortal danger; face the fanatical violence of the enigmatic Timothy Mageba. And at the end of his search, surrounded by the treasures of the ancients and the sarcophagi of their kings, he would find himself cast mysteriously backward through time to share the last, tumultuous days of the shining city.

Part One

THE image cut across the darkened projection room and expanded silently on the screen—and I did not recognize it. I had waited fifteen years for such a photograph, yet what I now saw made no sense to me. I had expected some small object: a skull perhaps—certainly not this gray surrealistic pattern.

Louren's voice, tight with excitement, gave me the clue. "Taken at thirty-six thou. at six forty-seven p.m. on September fourth—eight days ago."

An aerial photograph, then. My eyes and brain adjusted, and almost instantly I felt the first tickle of my own excitement.

"I've got a charter company running an aerial survey over all my concession areas," Louren went on. "This photograph is only one of a couple of hundred thousand. However, the people in topographic analysis spotted it, and passed it on to me."

His face turned toward me, pale in the glare of the projector. "Tell me where you've seen geologic patterns like that. Look at it, Ben! It's classic. Double enclosure and phallic towers—"

He was exaggerating. The shape was certainly reminiscent of the controversial Zimbabwe ruins in Rhodesia, but the outlines were faint. I didn't want to accept it, to make myself vulnerable again with hope. "It could be anything, Lo," I protested. "A trick of light. Even conceding it's man-made, it could be agriculture—"

"A hundred miles from the nearest surface water? Forget it,

Ben! You are without doubt the most miserable damn pessimist in Africa. You know as well as I do that this is—"

"Don't say it!" I shouted. "It's—it's bad luck." I sometimes stutter when I am excited, but that is the least of my physical disabilities, and doesn't worry me. "Just tell me where this is."

Louren laughed as he turned up the lights. The sound was good, for he didn't often laugh these days. "My little leprechaun," he teased. "I want you to admit my find before I tell you a thing."

"All right." I looked away and picked my words. "It looks to me as though you may have found . . . it."

"You beauty!" he shouted. "You little beauty."

It was years since I had seen him like this—the cares of Sturvesant Minerals forgotten. "Now," I said, "where is it?"

"Come," he said, and we went to the table on which was spread a chart of Botswana and western Rhodesia. It was a high table, and I scrambled quickly onto a chair. Now I was almost on equal terms with Louren, who stood beside me. His finger moved across the chart and stopped—my heart seemed to stop with it. The latitude was perfect; all the clues I had so painstakingly gathered pointed to this area. "Here," he said. "Two hundred and twelve miles southeast of Maun, fifty-six miles from the southwestern beacon of the Wankie game reserve, tucked below low hills—"

"When can we leave?" I asked.

"Wow!" Louren shook his head. "You do believe it. You really do. But I can't get away before Tuesday of next week."

"Next week!" I cried in anguish.

"Ben, I've got the annual general meeting of Anglo-Sturvesant on Friday, and on Saturday I have business in Zurich."

"Cut Zurich," I begged. "Send one of your bright young men."

"When somebody lends you twenty-five million it's only polite to go fetch the check yourself, not send the office boy."

"My God, Lo. It's only money. This is really important."

Louren stared at me, the amber eyes reflective. "Twenty-five million is only money?" He shook his head wonderingly, as though he had heard a new truth. "I suppose you're right." He smiled, the smile of affection for a well-loved friend. "Sorry, Ben. Tuesday. We've just put a landing strip in Maun that will take a Lear jet.

We'll fly there, then go in light and fast. I'll lay on a Land-Rover and a pair of three-ton trucks. . . ."

As he talked Louren led me out into the long gallery where works of leading South African artists mingled with those of the great internationals, living and dead. Louren and his ancestors had spent their money wisely. He paced easily over the sound-deadening Oriental carpets—and I matched him stride for stride.

"If you turn up what we are both hoping for," he went on, "you can go in full-scale with any equipment you call for."

"You know, it could cost a couple of hundred thousand."

"It's only money, like the man said." He gave the great bull laugh I cannot resist. We faced each other, grinning like a couple of conspirators. "Can you meet me off the Zurich flight, seven thirty Monday evening? Meantime, you get your end arranged."

"I'll need a copy of that photograph."

"I've already had an enlargement delivered to the institute." He glanced at his gold wristwatch. "Damn. I'm late."

He turned to the door just as Hilary Sturvesant came through from the patio. She wore a short tennis dress, and her legs were achingly beautiful. A tall girl with gold-brown hair hanging shiny and soft to her shoulders. "Darling, you aren't going?"

"I'm sorry, Hil. I meant to tell you I wouldn't be staying for lunch, but Ben will need somebody to hold him down."

"You've shown him?" She stooped to kiss me on the lips, with not the least sign of revulsion. Every time she does that she makes me her slave for another hundred years. "What do you think of it, Ben? Is it possible?"

Before I could answer, Louren had slipped his arm about her waist and they both smiled down at me. "He's frothing at the mouth. He wants to rush into the desert now, this minute."

Then Louren pulled Hilary to him and they embraced. They are, for me, the epitome of beautiful woman- and manhood. Hilary, in her middle twenties, is younger than he by twelve years, his fourth wife and the mother of only the youngest of his seven children.

"Give Ben some lunch, my darling. I'll be home late."

"I'll miss you," she said, as he pulled away from her.

"And I you. I'll see you Monday, Ben. So long, partner."

HILARY LED ME onto the wide flagged patio. Five acres of lawn and flowerbeds sloped down to the stream and artificial lake. Both tennis courts were occupied, and a shrieking mob of small bodies thrashed the water of the swimming pool. Two servants were laying out a cold buffet on the patio table.

I saw half a dozen young matrons in tennis dress sprawled in the lounging chairs, and steeled myself, trying to draw myself up to an extra inch of height. "Girls," Hilary said, "I want you to meet Dr. Benjamin Kazan, director of the Institute of African Anthropology and Prehistory. Ben, this is Marjory Phelps."

I acknowledged the slightly overeffusive greetings, giving each my eyes and voice; they are my good things. It was as difficult for them as it was for me. You do not expect your hostess to spring a hunchback on you with the prelunch drinks.

The children rescued me. Thirteen-year-old Bobby Sturvesant spotted me and came at a run, shrieking, "Uncle Ben! Uncle Ben!" She flung her cold wet arms around my neck and dragged me away to become overwhelmed by the rest of the young. I find it easier with children; they either do not seem to notice or they come straight out with it. "Why do you walk all bent over like that?"

But for once I was not very good value. I was too preoccupied to give them my full attention. Soon Hilary returned me to the league of young mothers, where I now made a better impression. Young Bobby Sturvesant pours Scotch whisky with the same heavy hand she uses to pour Coca-Cola, so it was past three o'clock before I floated back to the institute.

THE envelope was on my desk, marked "Private and Confidential," with a note pinned to one corner, "This came for you at lunchtime. Looks exciting! Sal."

With a quick stab of jealousy I inspected the seal of the envelope. It was unbroken. Sally hadn't been into it, which must have taken all her self-control. She has an almost neurotic curiosity. She calls it a fine inquiring scientific mind.

I guessed she would arrive within the next five minutes, so I found the packet of peppermints in my top drawer and slipped one into my mouth to smother the whisky fumes before I drew out

the glossy enlargement and adjusted the magnifying lens over it.

"What are you looking at?" asked Sally from the doorway, making me leap in my seat. She lounged against the jamb, her hands thrust deeply into the pockets of her grubby white lab coat. Dark hair drawn back with a ribbon from the wide forehead, large green eyes well spaced beside the pert nose, high cheekbones, sensual mouth. A big girl with long strong legs in tight blue jeans. Why do I always like them big?

"Good lunch?" she asked, starting toward my desk.

"Great," I answered, deliberately covering the photograph with the envelope. "A very good duck and truffles in aspic."

Five feet from me she sniffed. "And peppermint-flavored whisky! Yummy!" She came to perch on the edge of my desk. "Come on, Ben. I've been bursting ever since it arrived. I'd have steamed it open, only the electric kettle is broken."

Dr. Sally Benator has been my assistant for two years, which is coincidentally the exact period of time I have been in love with her. I made room for her behind the desk and uncovered the photograph. "All right, let's see what *you* make of it."

She squeezed in beside me, her upper arm touching my shoulder, a contact that shivered my whole body. In two years she had become as natural as the children about my hump. I had to go slowly, so as not to alarm her, but in another two years I hoped to have accustomed her to the thought of me as a husband.

She peered into the magnifying lens. When she looked up, her green eyes sparkled. "Ben. Oh, Ben, I'm so glad for you!"

Somehow her easy acceptance annoyed me. "You're jumping the gun," I snapped. "There could be a dozen natural explanations."

"No." Smiling, she crossed to the bookshelves and opened one of twelve volumes that bear as the author's name, Benjamin Kazin. "*Ophir*," she read. "*A personal investigation of the prehistoric goldworking civilization of Central Africa and the lost city of the Kalahari Desert*. It's quite interesting. Have you read it?"

"There's a chance, Sal," I agreed. "Just a chance, but—"

"Where does it lie?" she cut in. "In the gold belt?"

I nodded. "Yes, it's there all right."

She grinned triumphantly, and bent over the lens again. With

her finger she touched the arrow in the corner of the photo that gave the northerly bearing. "The whole city—"

"If it is a city."

"The whole city," she repeated with emphasis, "faces north. Into the sun. Sun and Moon, the two gods, the phallic towers—"

"Sal, those aren't towers, they're just dark patches on a photograph taken from thirty-six thousand feet."

"Thirty-six thousand?" Sal's head jerked up. "Then it's huge! You could fit Zimbabwe into the main enclosure half a dozen times. But I wonder why it's crescent-shaped like that?" She straightened, and for the first time—the very first wonderful time—threw her arms around my neck and hugged me. "Oh, I'm so excited! When do we go to find your lost city?"

"Well"—I considered how to say it—"Louren Sturvesant and I leave on Tuesday. He didn't mention an assistant, so I don't think you will be coming along."

"Do you want to bet on that?"

I like reasonable odds when I do bet, so I told Sally to pack. We were ready in twenty-four hours. She was a professional, and her personal effects filled a single small valise. But her sketchbooks and paints were bulky, so that with my equipment, sample bags and boxes and one canvas suitcase we had a formidable pile.

FOR the next six days we killed time squabbling over the photograph. When our tensions built up to explosion point, Sally would lock herself in her office and work on the translation of the rock engraving from Drie Koppen. Rock paintings, engravings and the translation of ancient writings are her specialty.

On the morning of Louren's return Sally was so overwrought by the possibility that he would veto her inclusion that she was quite unbearable. To escape her I went to spend an hour in the African languages section with my dour giant, Timothy Mageba.

Timothy started at the institute twelve years ago, as a sweeper and cleaner. It took me six months to discover that apart from his own southern Sotho he spoke sixteen other dialects. I taught him to speak English fluently in eighteen months, to write it in two years. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts five years later. He is

the only man I know, apart from myself, who speaks the dialects of both the northern and Kalahari Bushmen.

For a linguist, he is a peculiarly silent man. He stands six feet five inches, muscled like a professional wrestler, yet he moves with the grace of a dancer. He fascinates me, and frightens me a little. His head is completely hairless, shaven and oiled to gleam like a black cannonball. Despite the white shirts and dark business suits he wears, there is a satanic presence about him.

Under my loose surveillance he runs the institute's African languages department. He has published two volumes of African history which raised a storm of abuse from white scholars and reviewers. As a child he was apprenticed to his grandfather, who was witch doctor and historical custodian of his tribe. As part of his training Timothy was placed under hypnosis by his grandfather and had the entire tribal history taped on his brain. He can still throw himself into a trance and establish total recall of a mass of lore, unwritten history and magical doctrine. I drew on this material when writing *Ophir*, which is about the legend of the ancients, fair-skinned warriors from across the sea who mined the gold, enslaved the tribes, built walled cities and flourished for centuries before vanishing almost without trace. But Timothy edits the information he passes on to me—some of it is too secret.

On that Monday morning he rose with his usual greeting. "*Machane!* Blessed one!" According to Bantu lore those of us with clubfeet, albino pigmentation, squint eyes or humped backs are blessed by the spirits and endowed with psychic powers. I derive a sneaky sort of pleasure from this belief, and Timothy's greeting always gives me a lift.

We began a desultory conversation, flicking from subject to subject. "It will be strange," I said at last, "not to have you along."

Timothy became wary. He knew I was going to start again about the lost city. I had shown him the photograph and had been pumping him for days. "Anyway," I went on, "you're probably not missing anything. If only I knew what to look for—"

I broke off. Timothy's eyes had glazed. It is a physical thing, an opaque bluish film that seems to cover the eyeballs. His head sinks into his neck, his lips twitch—and the gooseflesh runs up my

arms. As often as I have seen it, I can never shake off the supernatural thrill of watching him go into a trance. I waited eagerly, knowing that if the material was taboo it would be but a few seconds before he broke the spell with a deliberate effort of will.

"Evil"—he spoke in the quavering voice of his grandfather—"to be cleaned from the earth and the minds of men, forever."

His head jerked, the conscious mind intervening. His eyes cleared. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "Would you like some coffee, Doctor? They have repaired the kettle at last."

He had switched off. I would get no more that day. "No thanks, Timothy." I looked at my watch. "Still some things to do."

"Go in peace, *machane,* and the spirits guide your feet."

LOUREN STURVESANT came out of the doors of the terminal, the first off the Zurich flight through customs and immigration. Two of what I call his BYM—bright young men—were a pace behind him on either side. Five waiting BYM hurried forward in order of seniority for the brief handclasp, and then fell into formation. As Anglo-Sturvesant drove across the crowded floor like a panzer division, Louren stood out by a golden head, his sunbronzed features grim in contrast to the artificial smiles around him.

"Come on!" I said. I caught Sally's hand and dived into the crowd. I went in at the level of their legs, cleaving them apart like the waters of the Red Sea, Sally running behind me like the Israelites. Louren nearly tripped over us.

"Ben." I saw then how tired he was, but a warm smile cleared the fatigue for a moment. "I'm sorry. I should have warned you. Something has come up. I'm on my way to a meeting."

He saw the expression on my face. "No—don't jump to conclusions. It's still on. I'll meet you at the airfield, five o'clock tomorrow morning." We shook hands quickly. "All the way, partner?"

"All the way, Lo," I agreed, grinning at the schoolboy inanity, and then they swept on by through the glass doors.

We were halfway back to Johannesburg before Sally spoke. "Did you ask him about me?"

"There wasn't time, Sal. You saw that. He was so rushed."

Neither of us spoke again until I parked the Mercedes beside

her little red Alfa in the empty parking lot of the institute. "Would you like a cup of coffee?" I asked. "You won't sleep—not tonight. We could have a game of chess."

We went through the public rooms and on into my flat. Sal set out the chessmen while I made coffee. When I came back from the kitchen she was sitting cross-legged on a leather pouf, brooding over the pieces. The light glowed on the sun-touched olive of her skin, and watching her I thought my heart might burst.

She looked up. "White to play," she said.

If I can weather her first lightning attacks, I wear her down with pawn play. She calls it the creeping death. At last she toppled her king with a groan of exasperation and stood up to pace restlessly about. Suddenly she whirled and faced me. "I hate the bastard," she said in a strangled voice. "Big, arrogant god-man! If we make any discoveries, guess who'll hog all the glory?"

I was startled by her tone. "What *are* you talking about?"

"The face, the walk, the condescending air, the presumption—"

"Stop it, Sally. You're not to talk like that."

"Did you see those frightened little men? Did you see *yourself?* One of the kindest men I've ever known, one of the finest brains, scampering and tail-wagging . . ." She was half hysterical, tears running down her face. "I hated him! He was demeaning you."

I stood stricken—and her temper changed. She pressed her hand to her mouth. "I must be mad," she whispered. "Why did I say those things? Oh, Ben, I'm sorry." She knelt before me, hugging me to her. I stood like a statue, cold with dread. For although this was what I had prayed for, it had come so suddenly that now I was far into unknown territory. Sally lifted her head and looked up into my face. "Forgive me, please."

I kissed her, and her mouth was warm and salty. Her lips opened under mine, and my fear was gone. "Ben, make love to me—please."

"The lights," I whispered. "Please switch off the lights, Sally."

"I know, my darling. I understand." She turned off the lights.

AFTERWARD I felt as if my mind had broken free from my body and was floating in warm darkness. For the first time in my life I was completely at rest, contented and secure.

When at last Sally spoke, her voice came as a small shock. "Will you sing for me, Ben?"

She put on the light and we blinked at each other, owl-eyed. Her face was flushed, her hair a dark unruly tumble.

"Yes," I said. "I want to sing."

I went into my dressing room and took the guitar from the closet. As I closed the door, there was my reflection in the full-length mirror. I looked at the strange, telescoped body over which I had agonized since childhood and for once I did not hate it. Then I hopped back onto the couch where Sally still lay, and squatted beside her. "Sing sad—please Ben," she said, closing her eyes.

After I had sung for a short while a tear squeezed out between her lids. Sometimes my singing does call up real tears or laughter. Without opening her eyes, she turned her head toward me. "Tell me about you and Louren Sturvesant," she said.

The question took me by surprise, and I was silent for a moment. She opened her eyes. "I'm sorry, Ben. You don't have to."

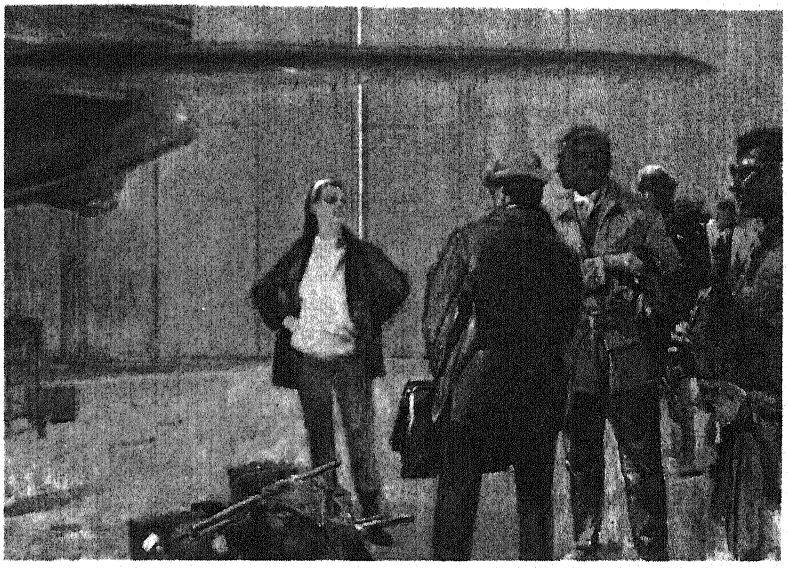
"I'd like to," I answered quickly. "You see, you were wrong about him. You can't apply ordinary standards to the Sturvesants. My father worked for them. He died a year after my mother, and I became one of several Sturvesant orphans. Louren's father sent me to the same school as his own son. A Jew at a church school, and a cripple at that—you can imagine how it was. Small boys are such monsters. Louren dragged me out of a urinal where four of them were trying to drown me. He beat the daylights out of them, and I've been in his charge ever since. At first, financing the institute was something he did just for me—but now it has become his hobby. You'll be surprised how knowledgeable he is. He loves this land, just as you and I do—" I broke off, for she was staring at me.

"You love him, Ben, don't you?"

I dropped my eyes. "He has been protector, benefactor—and the only friend I've ever had. Yes, in the biblical sense, I love him."

She touched my cheek. "I'll try to like him. For your sake."

IT WAS still dark next morning when we drove in through the airport gates. Sal was huddled into her coat, silent and withdrawn. There were floodlights picking out the private Sturvesant hangar,



and as we approached I saw Louren's Ferrari parked in his reserved slot. Nearby were another half dozen sedans.

"Oh God," I groaned. "He's got the whole team with him."

I parked beside the Ferrari, and Sal and I began unloading. She picked up her equipment, easel and all, and went on into the hangar. When I followed her it was already too late. Against a backdrop of the sharklike Lear jet, seven of Louren's BYM stood in an awed circle about the two protagonists. Louren rarely loses his temper, and only after severe provocation. In two minutes Sally had put him in a towering rage. She had dropped her equipment on the concrete floor and was trading him glare for glare.

"Dr. Kazin told me I could come."

"I don't care if the king of England told you you could come. The plane is full, and I have no intention of dragging a female with me on the first break I've had in six months."

"I didn't realize it was a pleasure jaunt—"

"Will somebody throw this bitch out?" The BYM made a tentative advance. Sally picked up her heavy easel, and the advance petered out. I scuttled into the void and grabbed Louren's arm.

"Please, Lo. Can we talk?" I almost dragged him toward the flight office. "Look, I'm terribly sorry about this. . . ."

Five minutes later he strode out to the Lear without a glance either at Sal or the frozen BYM, and a moment later could be seen in the cockpit beside the pilot. I went to the junior BYM and gave him the word. "Mr. Sturvesant wants you to arrange a charter for yourself to Gaberones." Then I turned to the others. "I wonder if you could give us a hand with the luggage."

Sally, I was sorry to see, wore a glow of triumph. "Back seat," I whispered harshly. "And try to make yourself invisible. You almost talked yourself out of a job."

We had been airborne for ten minutes when the pilot, Roger van Deventer, came back along the aisle. He looked at Sal with open admiration. "Lady, that was worth a month's salary."

Sally, who had been suitably subdued since my warning, perked up. Roger turned to me. "The man wants to speak to you, Doctor."

Louren was chatting with flight control over the radio, and waved me into the copilot's seat. When he finished he passed me a leg of turkey from the hamper beside him. "Coffee in the thermos. Help yourself. Sorry about the detour—I'm dropping the boys off at Gaberones for a series of meetings with the Botswana government on a new mining concession. Then we can press on alone."

He filled his mouth with turkey and spoke around it. "Ben—how long is it since we got away together? Must be all of ten years." He was relaxed and easy, with not a trace of his earlier rage.

"We must do it more often, Lo."

"Yes," he said, "but there's so little time."

"We've got five days," I said, heading the conversation away from Sally. It was half an hour before he mentioned her.

"That assistant of yours—the prizefighter. What's her name?"

I told him.

"Are you having your way with her?" he asked.

It was said so casually that for an instant I did not understand. Then I felt my vision blur with rage, and I think I could have killed him. I lied in a thick, shaken voice. "No."

"Just as well," he grunted. "She's a wild one. Well, as long as she doesn't mess up the trip." If only I had told him then. But it

was too private and precious a thing, and then the moment passed.

At Gaberones there was a deputation of senior officials, and it was three hours before the Lear with just four of us aboard slashed up through the deep cloud cover into the high bright sunshine.

PETER LARKIN, who would service our expedition, was waiting for us at Maun: an anachronism complete with fat cartridges looped to the breast of his bush jacket, big beefy face and huge hands, the right index finger scarred by the recoil of heavy rifles. He has lived in Africa all his life and has never bothered to learn a native language. He makes his points with boot or fist. His knowledge of the animals on which he preys is limited to how to find them and where to aim to bring them down.

While his gang of hunting boys loaded our gear into the trucks, Sally asked me, eyeing Larkin with distaste, "Is Ernest Hemingway coming with us?"

"No such luck," I assured her. I was trying to form some idea of those who were accompanying us. First, the drivers of our three-ton trucks, their superior status evident in their white shirts, gray slacks and shod feet. They were both Shangaan. The cook and the two gnarled and gray-headed gunboys were Matabele. These were the elite, and took no part in the scurryings of the camp boys, who were Bamangwato.

Sally and I went to say good-by to Roger. "Don't frighten the lions," he told her. Clearly she had made a conquest. He climbed into the jet and we watched him take off.

"What are we waiting for?" asked Louren.

"What indeed?" I agreed. Louren took the wheel of the Land-Rover, and I climbed in beside him. Sally was in the back seat, the gunbearers on the bench seats.

At first the road ran through open baobab country, dry and sun-scorched. The Land-Rover lifted a pale bank of drifting dust, and the two trucks followed us at a distance. At intervals we passed villages of mud and thatched huts where potbellied black children lined the road as though we were royalty. When Sally started tossing our lunch to them I pulled out my guitar to distract her.

"Sing happy, Ben," Sally instructed.

"And bawdy," added Louren, possibly to needle her.

"Yes," Sally agreed readily. "Make it meaty and happy."

I started on the saga of Eskimo Nell, with Sal and Louren shouting the words. We were children on a picnic that first day, and we made a good run to the pan. The sun was a ball of fire on the horizon when we stopped on the edge of the somber, glistening salt plain. I timed it at seventeen minutes from the moment the trucks arrived to when the tents were pitched and we three were sitting around the fire, drinking whisky on the rocks.

THEY were a good, cheerful gang that Larkin had given us, and when they gathered around their own fire they sweetened the night with the old hunting songs. I sat and listened, half to them and half to the argument going on between Sal and Louren.

Sally was defending the premise of my book *Ophir* which postulated an invasion of south-central Africa from the Atlantic side in about 200 B.C. by Phoenician or Carthaginian colonizers who flourished until about 450 A.D. before disappearing abruptly.

"They were not equipped for a major voyage of discovery as early as that," Louren needled, "let alone a colonizing."

"You will find, Mr. Sturvesant, that Herodotus records a circumnavigation of Africa by an expedition led by Phoenician navigators as early as 600 B.C. or thereabouts."

"A single voyage," Louren pointed out.

"Not just a single voyage, Mr. Sturvesant. Hanno sailed from Gibraltar to a point on the west coast of Africa in about 460 B.C., a voyage from which he returned with enough ivory and gold to whet the appetites of all the merchant adventurers."

With assumed reluctance Louren retreated before her onslaughts, but he made a stand on my theory of incursion from the west instead of the east. He repeated the arguments of my critics.

The accepted theory was that the point of entry was in the east, from the mouth of the Zambezi. My theory, based on early texts and my own excavations, was that a Mediterranean people voyaged down the west coast of Africa, probably establishing trading stations on the Gold, Ivory and Nigerian coasts, until their explorations led them into an unpeopled vacuum. I guessed they'd have

journeyed up a river—it might have been the Cunene or the Orange—and thence overland to discover the mines of Manica, and possibly also diamonds in the gravel of the lakes and rivers. Sufficient wealth anyway to justify the establishing of a walled fortress and trading station, perhaps on the shores of a lake that overflowed the present boundaries of the salt pan.

Suddenly Louren gave up his needling. The next minute all three of us were joyously anticipating the discovery of our lost city. "The lake would have spread at least fifty miles beyond the present pan," Louren pointed out. "About a hundred years ago Burchell described Lake Ngami as an inland sea, and nowadays it's a puddle. Probably the ancient lake extended to the foot of the hills on which our ruins are placed. We have plenty of evidence of the gradual drying up of southern Africa."

"Ben"—Sally grabbed my arm—"the crescent shape in the photograph could be the town following the line of the shore!"

"God," Louren whispered, "I can hardly wait for tomorrow."

The whisky bottle had taken a terrible beating before he and Sally went off to their tents. I knew I could not sleep yet, so I left the camp and walked out onto the surface of the pan.

When I returned, a lantern still burned in Sally's tent, and her silhouette was magnified against the pale canvas, a huge, dark portrait of my love. She was reading, sitting cross-legged upon her bed, but as I watched she extinguished the lantern.

I waited awhile, then went to her tent. "May I come in?"

"All right—just for a minute."

In the gloom her nightdress was a pale blur. "I came to tell you I love you," I said softly.

I heard her little catch of breath. "Dear, sweet Ben."

"I would like to be with you tonight."

It seemed to me there was regret in her voice as she replied, "No, Ben. Everyone would know about it. I don't want that."

NEXT morning everybody was in high spirits, and by seven o'clock we were driving along the edge of the pan.

We had been going for about an hour when three stately gemsbok broke out into the open and trotted in single file away from

us. Louren slammed on the Land-Rover brakes. With the smooth timing of the professional the old Matabele gunbearer put the big .375 Magnum Holland and Holland into Louren's hand and he was off, running doubled up behind the fringe of grass that lined the edge of the pan.

"Why should he want to kill them?" Sally asked.

"It's one of the things he likes doing," I replied.

"What's he up to now?" she asked a moment later. The gemsbok had stopped, but Louren was still running.

"He's playing the rules," I explained. "It's an offense to fire within five hundred yards of a vehicle."

Suddenly she had jumped out of the car, climbed onto the hood, cupped her hands, and was yelling, "Run, you fools! Run!"

The gemsbok erupted into startled flight and I saw Louren drop into a firing position. The rifle jerked, and the leading gemsbok rolled in a drift of white dust. Louren fired again, and the second animal tumbled. The last gemsbok ran on alone.

With Sally in the back seat I drove to where Louren waited. He handed the rifle to the gunbearer, and as I relinquished the wheel to him the tang of burned cordite filled the cab. He glanced at Sally. "Thanks," he said. "I prefer a running shot."

"Why didn't you kill all three of them?" Her tone was neutral.

"You're only allowed two on a license."

"Jolly sporting," said Sally. "It's nice to meet a true gentleman."

Louren drove us out to where the gemsbok lay, and I went with him to watch the gunboys skin the animals with the skill of Harley Street surgeons. "You might have warned me we had one of *them* on this trip," Louren told me bitterly. "She's your assistant—do try to keep her under control."

I moved back to the car, giving him time to recover his temper, and spread the aeronautical map on the hood. He soon joined me. Navigation is one of his big things, and he fancies himself no end. "We'll strike in here"—he pointed to a dry riverbed—"on a compass bearing." He called the two drivers across and showed them the map. "This is where we want to go. To these hills. There's no name marked—what kind of country is it?"

The drivers exchanged furtive glances. "I do not know that coun-

try," Joseph, the elder driver, muttered—and then gave himself the lie. "Besides, there is no water."

"What do the white men seek?" an old gunboy asked Joseph in Sindebele. He and his companion had finished their work.

"Katuba Ngazi," the driver explained, convinced by now that we understood none of their language. This, then, was the first time I heard the name: Katuba Ngazi—the Hills of Blood.

"What have you told them?" demanded the gunbearer.

"That we do not know the place."

"Good."

Louren interrupted their talk. "Today you will learn something. For the first time you will see these hills." He rolled up the map. "Now get the meat loaded and let us go on."

In five minutes the whole tone of the expedition had changed. The smiles and the high spirits were gone. The tempo of work dropped almost to zero, and it took half an hour to load the butchered gemsbok. While this was happening I told Louren of the exchange between the Africans.

"Hills of Blood! Wonderful!" Louren enthused. "It means they must know about the ruins—there's probably a taboo on them."

"But they'll try to sabotage the trip," I said.

We got off the pan once more, up on the firm but sandy ground along the edge, and drove for twenty minutes before we realized that neither of the trucks was following us. We turned back and found one truck, its side hanging half over a ravine, its belly heavily grounded. The other was parked nearby, and fourteen men were sitting around in various attitudes of relaxation.

"All right, gentlemen, let's get it out," Louren suggested with heavy irony. Despite the ladylike efforts of all fourteen, half an hour later the truck still hung there. Finally they gave up.

Louren turned to me and began to strip off his bush jacket. "Front end first, Ben. Okay?"

"All right, Lo." I estimated the front-end weight at a little over two thousand pounds. The Africans looked puzzled, and one of them giggled. Even Sally climbed out of the Land-Rover to watch as Louren and I stooped to the front of the truck.

"All the way, partner?"

"All the way, Lo." I heard the gasps as we heaved the front of the truck clear of the ravine, then went around to the back and did the same there. Then we started to laugh, shakily at first, but building up to a full gale. Louren put his arm around my shoulder and led me back to Joseph and the rest of our retinue. "You are," Louren told them, still laughing, "a bunch of frail old women and giggling virgins. Translate that for them, Joseph."

I noticed that Joseph gave them a correct rendition.

"And as for you, Joseph, you are a fool." Louren stepped forward and hit him with an open hand on the side of the head. The force of it spun Joseph around and threw him on the ground.

"You see that I am laughing," Louren said to his startled audience. "Think on what may happen if I am made angry."

The truck was reloaded with alacrity, and we went on.

"Well," said Sally, "why didn't the big white *bwana* use a whip, rather than soiling his hands?"

"Louren didn't enjoy hitting the man, Sal," I said. "But Joseph ditched the truck deliberately. We've got three and a half days left, and we can't afford any more tricks."

All the same, it soon became apparent that we would not reach the hills that day. The going was heavy—sand veld clutched at our wheels. Half a dozen times the trucks had to be dragged out by the four-wheel transmission of the Land-Rover. Each time this happened there were profuse apologies from driver and crew.

Sunset found us fifteen miles from the hills. I climbed into the top branches of the acacia under which we camped and saw distant cliffs catch the last rays of the sun and glow orange red. I watched until they melted into the dark sky. A mystic sense of predestiny filled me with melancholy.

When I climbed down, Louren was sitting alone by the fire. "Where's Sally?" I asked.

"Gone to bed. In a sulk. We got into a discussion about blood sports and beating up blacks."

There was no singing from the servants' fire as Louren and I ate grilled gemsbok liver and bacon, washed down with warm red Cape wine. Soon after we had eaten he stood up. "I'm bushed. See you in the morning, Ben."

Restless, and still in my mood of disquiet, I wandered toward the servants' fire. My feet made no sound in the soft sand, and one of the old gunbearers was speaking as I approached. His words came to me clearly. "This evil to be cleaned from the earth and the minds of men, forever." The very words that Timothy had spoken, but in a different language! I stared fascinated at the time-quarried features of the old Matabele. He must have sensed my scrutiny, for he spoke again. "Be careful, the spider is here."

They had named me for my small body and long limbs. As they glanced up I moved away to my tent, but the old gunbearer's words stayed with me, troubling me until I fell asleep.

I DROVE the next morning while Louren pored over the map, directing me toward a distinctive clump of giant candelabra euphorbia trees that had showed up in the aerial photograph. The hills at that point were towering cliffs between two and three hundred feet high, their exposed fronts furrowed and weather-worn, and below them grew the small grove of trees. Underground water must have been there to nourish such giants.

I threaded the Land-Rover through the scrub in a silence that steadily grew more strained. Sally broke it at last, voicing our disappointment. "Well—we should be within the walls of the main enclosure by now—if there was one."

We parked at the foot of the cliff and climbed out stiffly. There was no trace of a city, not the faintest outline of wall or keep. Then the trucks came up and the servants climbed out. "All right," said Louren. "While they set up camp, we'll scout the place. I'll go this way—you two go the other."

We picked our way along the base of the cliff, through the grove of silent trees. Once we startled a small bird as it dipped its long curved beak into the red blossoms of a wild aloe, also a small troop of vervet monkeys that fled shrieking through the treetops. Three or four miles on we stopped to rest. "I could cry," Sal said.

"I know. I feel the same way."

"But those patterns on the photograph!" she protested. "The town following the shoreline at the ancient lake."

"Some optical illusion, clearly. Remember, that photograph was

taken almost at sunset. Light and shade play funny tricks." She really did look as if she might burst into tears, and I put my arm around her. "I'm sorry," I said, and she offered me her lips.

"Wow!" she said at last, and broke away gently. "Come on, Ben. Let's circle back to the camp, away from the cliff. There may be something out there." We tramped slowly, and along the way we saw flowers, and bees busy in their blossoms. We found where recent rains had scoured a shallow ravine, although there was now no trace of moisture. I climbed down to examine the exposed layers of stone and earth. Three feet below the surface the pebbles were rounded and waterworn.

"Good guess, Sal." I picked out the shell of a type of freshwater mussel encrusted in the sandstone. "That proves at least a little of our theory. At one time this was the bed of a lake—look."

"I wish," she said, "it were something a bit more exciting."

We climbed out and walked away without a backward glance. Perhaps it was the intensity of hopes unfulfilled that clouded my reasoning. I do not usually miss as many as four scientific hints in one hour. I have a tested IQ of 156. I'm supposed to be a genius!

"Anything?" asked Louren as we joined him at lunch. We shook our heads. "Me neither. I've radioed Larkin to send in a helicopter tomorrow for one last search from the air. If there's still nothing, I'll have to fly out. I'm afraid there's only one passenger seat, so you two will have to bus out the hard way." He lit a cigar. "I don't know what you intend to do this afternoon, but I'm taking the Land-Rover and gunbearers. I saw elephant spoor this morning."

Sally looked up quickly, but then merely frowned. I waited until Louren had driven off before I suggested to her, "I'm going to try to find a path to the top—do you want to come?" I wanted to sweep the area with binoculars for any trace of ruins.

"Deal me out, Ben. I think I'll do some sketching."

Joseph chose this moment to announce that some foolish person had left the taps open on four of the water tanks. "Therefore," he said with relish, "we will have to leave this place tomorrow." It was clearly a deliberate setback, but I couldn't work up any real anger. I merely nodded and set off along the base of the cliff. Within half a mile I had found a game trail leading into one

of the gullies that furrowed the red rock face. It was a steep climb, and I toiled for forty minutes before I came out on the top.

I found a vantage point on the edge of the cliff and vainly scanned the valley with my binoculars. Then, strangely, the sickening disappointment of it all gave way to a quiet sense of peace. I found myself wishing I could stay here in these haunting Hills of Blood. Sally and I together here in the wilderness, where I could teach her to love me. There is *something* here, I thought.

For dinner that night we ate grilled elephant heart sliced thin and covered with a biting pepper sauce. It had been a good day's hunt for Louren, compensating him for the other disappointment. Joseph's water problem merely raised a smile. When Louren is in an expansive mood he is irresistible. Sally tried to maintain a disapproving attitude, but she soon succumbed to his charm and laughed with us when he gave the toast: "To the city that never was, and the treasure we didn't find!"

THE helicopter came out of the south an hour before noon. Louren climbed into the seat beside the young pilot, and the ungainly craft began a series of sweeps along the cliffs. When it landed again, Louren greeted us with a shake of his head. "No go. Nothing. I'll have a bite and be on my way."

Twenty minutes later we were saying our farewells. "Well, Ben, I'm sorry about this. I can't understand it. Anyway, it won't be the last disappointment in our lives. See you in Jo'burg."

The helicopter rose in the air like a fat bumblebee and clattered away over the treetops. Bumblebee? Bees, birds and monkeys! For the first time in days the fabled Kazin brain began running on all cylinders. I grabbed Sally's arm, my excitement startling her. "Sally—we're staying. There are things here we've overlooked."

"Like what?" She gaped at me.

"The birds and the bees," I told her.

"Why, you randy old thing," she said.

WE SPLIT the water that was left, giving the servants enough to get back to Maun, and Sally and me a full gallon a day for ten days. I kept the Land-Rover, the radio, tents, bedding, a selection

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of tools and tinned food, and Louren's shotgun. When the two trucks were loaded and the servants all on board, I took the old Matabele gunbearer aside and spoke to him in Sindebele.

"My old and respected father, I have heard you speak of a great mystery that lives in this place., I ask you now as a son, and a friend, to tell me of these things." And I spoke a sentence that Timothy had given me, a secret recognition signal used at a high level among the initiates to the mysteries.

The old man gasped. Then he spoke softly. "My son, if you know those words then you should know the legend. When the rocks were soft and the air was misty"—an expression of the utmost antiquity—"there was an abomination in this place. The City of the Moon. Some say it is here still."

"Here, old father? Can you show it to me?"

The old gunbearer shook his head. "It is a ghost city. Only when the moon is full and the white ghosts come down, then it is said the city stands on the plain below the hills. And in the morning it is gone. Our ancestors placed a death curse upon these hills and commanded that this evil be cleaned from the earth and the minds of men, forever."

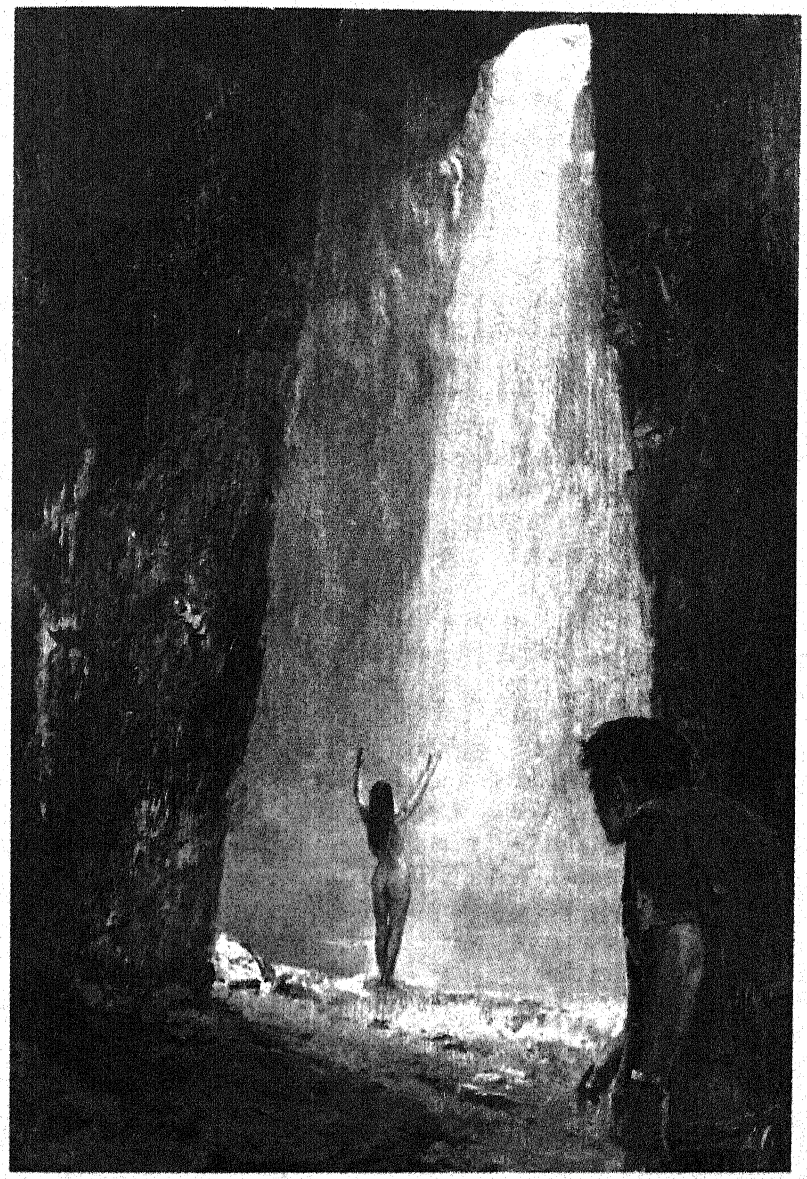
Again those same fateful words. "And is that the whole legend?" I asked. "There is nothing else?"

"There is nothing else." And I knew the old man spoke the truth.

We went back to the waiting trucks and I said good-by to Joseph. Then I turned to the camp boys and spoke in Sechuana. "The spider gives you greetings and wishes you peace." There was consternation among them as I used my nickname, but by the time they drove away they were laughing delightedly at the joke.

"You know," Sally murmured as the trucks disappeared, "I think I've been took. I've been stranded here with a man whose morals are definitely suspect." Then she giggled. "Isn't it lovely?"

I TOOK her to the grove of the monkeys and we flopped by a big tree while I told her what had taken me so long to realize. "The area is thick with birds, bees and animals, so they must have a permanent water supply. Wherever it is, it will be interesting. There's supposed to be no surface water for a hundred miles."



I suggested we watch the vervet monkeys. We sat for a long time, and then we saw them moving across the treetops toward the cliff, males, mothers with infants, and a rabble of youngsters. They reached the top branches of a gargantuan wild fig tree, one of those whose roots were embedded in the vertical cliff wall—and then they vanished.

"Where are they?" whispered Sally. "Did they go up the cliff?"

"No, I don't think so." I turned to her, grinning happily. "I think we've found it, Sal, but let's just wait and see."

Twenty minutes later the monkeys began reappearing. We waited till they moved off before we went forward. The convoluted roots of the fig tree formed a flight of irregular steps up to the point where the trunk emerged from the cliff. We climbed up and began examining the gigantic trunk. And there, polished by the passage of feet over the years, was a path into the rock.

Sally's eyes sparkled as she took my hand and we went in.

The opening was a long vertical crack in the cliff, and good light came in from high above. As we moved down a passage, the wall rising twenty feet on either side of us, it became suddenly clear that humans had been here before us. The smooth red walls were covered with magnificent ancient Bushman paintings.

"Ben! Oh, Ben! Just look at them!"

"Come on." I tugged at her. "Time for these later."

We moved along the passage as it slanted steadily downward for another hundred feet until the narrow V of the roof was lost in the gloom above. We heard the squeak of bats.

"There's light ahead," I said, and we went on into an incredible chamber, rounded, perhaps three hundred feet across, with sheer walls that rose like a cone to a tiny aperture showing blue sky beyond. I saw that this was an intrusion of limestone into the red sandstone, and that it was a typical sinkhole formation—similar to the Sleeping Pool at Sinoia in Rhodesia. As at Sinoia, the floor of the cavern led down to a mirrorlike pool of water.

Sally and I stood and stared, the beauty of this great cavern paralyzing us. From the arched roof hung stalactites of sparkling white, and the sun's rays pouring down like the beam of a searchlight lit the chamber with an eerie glow. These walls, too, were

decorated with lovely aboriginal Bushman art. I guessed there was two years' work for Sally and me in this wondrous place.

She disengaged her hand from mine and walked down to the pool. She peered into the still, emerald water and then began, slowly, deliberately, to strip off her clothing until, like some pagan priestess, she stood naked beside the pool and lifted her arms. With a strange atavistic thrill I saw this gesture as an ancient forgotten ritual. I wanted to cry out, a blessing perhaps, or an invocation.

She dived, a long graceful curve of white body and flowing dark hair. Deep, deep I could see the sweet clean shape of her in the crystal water. Then she came up, and waved, and I went down to the pool to help her out.

Presently we moved on around the walls of the cavern, awed by the profusion of paintings. But the light began to fail before we had completed our tour and we had to grope our way out.

Back at camp I raised Peter Larkin on the radio and asked him to get a message to Louren. "Tell him we've found rock paintings and will be staying on here indefinitely. If a Sturvesant Oil copter will be over this area, we could use . . ." I gave him a list.

"How are you for water?" bellowed Larkin.

"Fine. We managed to find an adequate supply here."

"You found water? But there isn't any there!"

"A small catchment in a rock basin from the last rain."

"Oh, I see. Okay then. Keep in touch. Over and out."

Sally grinned at me as I switched off. "You are a fibber."

I grinned back. "All in a good cause."

"BEN! Come here, please!" There was urgency in Sally's voice. We were exploring beyond the emerald pool, where the rear wall cut back steeply to form a low recess.

"Look," she said as I joined her. She moved her flashlight beam down across a representation of a massive human figure.

"Good Lord!" I gasped. "The White Lady of the Brandberg!" *

*The White Lady of the Brandberg (South West Africa) is one of the most celebrated rock paintings yet discovered in Africa. The famous Abbé Breuil named it a lady, but a recent writer has concluded it is a strikingly handsome young man, one of the emperors of the Ma-Iti (Phoenicians).

Sally played the beam downward until it spotlighted a vaunting, if stylized, display of sexual parts that gave the figure masculine pride and arrogance. "That's no *lady*," she murmured.

The figure was six feet tall, dressed in a yellow metal breastplate and ornate helmet with a high arched crest. On his left shoulder he carried a rounded shield on which yellow ornamental rosettes were set in a circle. In his right hand he carried bow and arrows, and from his waist hung sword and battle-axe. His shins were protected by greaves of the same yellow metal as the shield, and on his feet were light sandals. His skin was depicted as deathly white, but a fiery bush of red beard hung to his chest.

"A white man," I whispered. "Armor, rounded shield, battle-axe. Could it be—"

"A Phoenician king," Sally finished for me.

"The Phoenician type was likely to be dark-haired. This would have been a most unusual figure among them. How old is it, Sal?"

"I can't be sure yet, but I'd say two thousand years. This painting is the most ancient in the whole cavern."

"Look, Sal." I pointed eagerly to an army following the king, stick figures with swords and helmets.

"And look there." Sally picked out robed figures around the king's feet. "Priests, perhaps—and, oh Ben! Look!" She played the beam right across the stone canvas. For a moment I did not recognize it—then my heart jumped. Like a frieze, obliterated in places by moisture, swept a drawing of a stone fortress wall, built in blocks, and along its summit the same decorative chevrons that grace the main temple at the Zimbabwe ruins. Beyond the wall rose outlines of the phallic towers we had expected to find.

"It's our city, Ben. Our lost city."

"And its king, and his priests—and—oh my God! Look at that!"

"Elephants! War elephants with archers on their backs, just like Hannibal used against the Romans. So it *must* be Phoenician—even Carthaginian!"

THE next ten days were the happiest of my entire life. A helicopter brought what I had requested—a surveyor's theodolite, gas for the lamps, extra clothing, food—even bottles of whisky. A



note from Louren asked me not to keep him in the dark for *too* long. I sent him back my thanks and film of some of the more recent paintings. The helicopter flew away and left us to our idyll.

I worked from early morning till dark, photographing and mapping the cavern. Sally helped me or worked at her own task of painstakingly picking out figures of particular interest on the wall and re-creating them on waxed paper. At first our occupation of the cavern seriously affected its ecology, but within days the birds were back, dropping down through the hole in the roof to drink and bathe in the pool. Even the monkeys crept in through the rock passage to snatch a mouthful of water.

They were wonderful days of satisfying work, loving companionship, and the deep peace of that beautiful place. There was only one day on which anything was said to ruffle my happiness. Sally and I were sitting below the portrait of our wonderful white king. I said, "Those bastards who don't like my theories are going to have to change their minds now, Sal."

"Don't be so sure," she warned. She mimicked a pedantic lecturer. "'All this is secondhand observation by Bushmen, could have

been tampered with, and is open to different interpretations.'"

"Yes," I agreed. "When we show them the paintings of the fortified walls, they will say, 'But where are the walls themselves?' Oh, how I wish we had definite proof." The prospect of delivering our discovery to my scientific brethren was as appealing as climbing into a pit full of black mambas. "Let's have a swim, Sal."

When we climbed out to sit in the spot of bright sunlight that fell from the roof, I tried to alleviate my unhappiness by changing the subject. With all the finesse of a wounded rhinoceros I touched Sally's arm and blurted out, "Will you marry me, Sally?"

She turned a startled face to me, her cheeks and eyelashes still bejeweled with water droplets, and she stared at me for fully ten seconds before she began to laugh. "Oh, Ben, you funny old-fashioned thing. Just because you done me wrong—doesn't mean you have to marry me!" And before I could protest she had dived once again into the emerald pool.

For the rest of that day she was too occupied with her paints and brushes even to look in my direction. The message was loud and clear. I would press for no more than I now had.

THE helicopter came the following week, bringing more equipment I had radioed for: a rubber dinghy, a short fiberglass fishing rod, a reel, and a heavy line to the end of which I attached a five-pound lead weight. I assembled the equipment. Then Sally paddled us out to the center of the pool in the dinghy. I dropped the lead weight over the side, disengaged the clutch on the reel and let the line run out. It was marked at intervals of fifty feet, and as each marker of colored cotton disappeared into the water we counted aloud.

"Eleven, twelve, thirteen—Ben, it's bottomless!"

Even I was impressed. I had guessed at a depth of around four hundred feet, the same as the Sleeping Pool at Sinoia, but still the line unwound. At last it went slack. The weight was on the bottom. "A little over eight hundred and fifty feet," I said with awe. "I had plans to explore the bottom with a scuba, but that's out now. Whatever is down there will stay there."

Sally looked into the green depths, and her expression became

dazed. Suddenly she shook herself. "Oh! I felt a really creepy sensation, as though something walked over my grave."

I began to wind in the line, and Sally lay flat in the dinghy, staring up at the rock roof high above. "Ben." She spoke suddenly. "Look up there. That piece of rock sticking out. It's square, too regular to be natural, surely?"

I stopped winding and studied it. "Perhaps."

"Let's find where the cavern opens out on top of the hill, Ben." She sat up excitedly. "Let's go look at that square stone!"

We had marked the approximate position of the hole from the plain below, but even then we blundered about in the undergrowth on the crest of the hill for two hours before I nearly walked into that frightening black shaft. I was shaken, and kept a respectful distance from the edge as we worked our way around to where a slab of stone jutted squarely out into the void. Far below, the surface of the emerald pool glowed in the gloomy depths.

"It's certainly regular, Sal." I knelt down to examine the stone. "But I can't feel any chisel marks—"

I looked up and froze with horror. Sally had walked past me out to the end of the stone platform. She stood now with her toes over the edge, as if it were a diving board, and as I watched she pointed her hands straight at the sky in that same gesture she had used when first she saw the emerald pool.

"Sally!" I screamed. She swayed, and I scrambled to my feet. "Sally, don't!" I screamed again, for I knew she was about to plunge. I ran out onto the platform, and as she leaned slowly forward beyond the point of balance my hand closed on her upper arm. For brief seconds we struggled, then I pulled her to safety.

Suddenly she was shaking, and weeping hysterically. I clung to her, for I also was badly scared. Something had happened that went beyond my understanding. I asked her gently, "Why, Sal?"

"I don't know. I just felt dizzy, and there was a black roaring in my head, and—oh, I don't know, Ben. I just don't know."

By the time she was sufficiently recovered to begin the journey back to camp the sun was setting. We sat on the edge of the cliff while the moon pushed up fat and yellow above the trees. Her face was silver gray in the pale light, her expression infinitely sad.

"Shall we go, Sal?" I hugged her lightly.

"In a minute. It's so beautiful." I turned to stare out over the moon-silver plain and felt her stir against me. "Ben, look!" She was pointing down at the plain. "Look, Ben, there it is!"

I stared and saw nothing.

"Do you see it, Ben?"

"No." And then, like the face in a jigsaw puzzle, it was there. It was there, as it should have been from the beginning.

Sally was trembling. "It's our city, Ben."

It was vague, hazy. The double enclosure around the silent grove, vast symmetrical tracings on the silver plain. There were the circles that marked where the phallic towers had stood, and beyond the crescent-shaped walls the honeycomb cells of the lower city spread back from the shores of the vanished lake.

"The full moon," I whispered. "Low angle. Its light just right to pick up the outline of the foundations that must be so flattened we have been living on them all this time without knowing it!"

"The photograph!"

"Yes. From thirty-six thousand feet, with the light low enough to give the same effect. Louren didn't see it from the helicopter because it was noon—no shadows."

"But there are no walls, only the foundations. What happened to our city, Ben?"

"We'll find out, Sal." I handed her the flashlight from the knapsack, and we agreed upon a simple code of signals. For an hour I scampered about on the plain in obedience to Sally's signals, marking the perimeter of the city's walls with strips of cloth which I ripped from my shirt and tied to clumps of grass and shrubs.

Slowly the city vanished as the moon rose. I told Sal the old gunbearer's story about the City of the Moon.

"It just goes to show how every legend is based on fact," Sally said. "Anyway, it's a lovely name. Let's keep it."

Back in camp it was long past midnight before we got our feet down to earth and Sally brought up the subject of practical procedure. "What do we do, Ben? Do we tell Louren Sturvesant now?"

I poured a drink slowly. "Don't you think, Sal, we should sink a hole in the foundations, just to be sure? Just one tiny little hole?"

IT WAS AGAINST ALL the rules of archaeology. It was also irresistible. Early next morning, with Sally volunteering more than her share of advice, I chose a spot on the foundations of the outer wall. With tapes I marked out a narrow trench twenty feet long. We numbered the tapes at intervals of one foot, and then Sally cross-referenced her notebook to the markings on the tapes.

I spread a tarpaulin ready to receive the earth removed from the trench. Then I pulled off my shirt, spat on the palms of my hands and hefted my pick. As I shoveled earth onto the tarpaulin, Sally sifted it carefully. By noon we were both ready for some lunch and a rest. Afterward I worked for another hour, and then suddenly the blade of the pick turned up black. I swung again—still black. I dropped the pick and knelt in the trench.

"What is it?" Sally was there immediately.

"Ash," I said. "Charcoal!"

"An ancient hearth," she guessed.

I worked even more carefully now, trying to expose the layer of ash without disturbing it. We found it varied between a quarter of an inch and two inches deep along the length of the trench. Sally noted the depth from surface and the position of each of the samples we took for carbon-14 dating.

"Too big for a hearth," she said, and I nodded. "We shouldn't go deeper, Ben. Not like this, crashing in with pick and shovel."

"I know. We'll leave the ash undisturbed in half the trench, but I'm sure as hell going down to bedrock on the rest of it. You begin at the far end, and we'll work toward each other."

We found that immediately below the ash was a floor of hard clay. I guessed it was a transported layer of building filler, not occurring naturally. "Go carefully," I cautioned.

Almost at once she made our very first discovery from the ruins of the City of the Moon. As I write I have her notebook in front of me, with her grubby fingerprints and schoolgirl handwriting:

Trench I. Reference AC. 6. II.4. Depth 4′ 2½″.
Item: One glass bead. Oval. Blue. Circumference 2½ mm. Pierced. Slightly heat-distorted.
Remarks: Found in layer of ash at Level I.

Fifteen minutes later, using a small pick now, I came up with a small fragment of charred human bone. "Head of a human femur, the shaft burned away."

"Cannibalism? Cremation?" Sally asked. "What do *you* think?"

I was silent for a long time. "I think at this level the City of the Moon was sacked and burned, its inhabitants slaughtered, the walls thrown down and the buildings obliterated."

Sally whistled. "On the evidence of one bead and a piece of bone—that just has to be the greatest flyer of all time!"

Two days later I had dug deeper and begun to uncover the first of four courses of dry-packed masonry. The stones, cut from local sandstone, were clearly intended to support a substantial edifice—their average size was about four feet by two by two.

That night on the radio, in reply to Larkin's bellowed queries, I told him to ask Mr. Sturvesant to come at once.

"You mean drop everything and come running? That's a laugh."

"Just tell him, please."

The helicopter arrived at three o'clock the following afternoon. "What have you got for me, Ben?" Louren demanded.

"I think you're going to like it," I told him.

Five hours later we sat around the fire and Louren smiled at me over the rim of his glass. "You were right, lad. I do like it!"

He had followed us from excavation to cavern to cliff top, listening without comment. Just before sunset, at his insistence, we returned to the cavern to look again at the painting of the white king. Louren's attention never wavered from the chief figure until, just as we were about to turn away, his glance dropped to the robed figures below the king. "What are those?" he asked.

"We call them the priests," I told him.

"That one"—he pointed out the central priest, and his voice was sharp, almost alarmed—"what is he doing?"

"Bowing to the king," Sally suggested.

"Taller than the others, even though bowing?" Louren protested.

"Size was the Bushman artist's way of showing importance," I said. "The size of the central figure would signify that he was the high priest."

"If he is bowing, it's with the top third of his body only, and he's the only one doing it. The others are erect." His voice trailed away. "It's almost as though . . ." Suddenly he shivered. "It's become cold in here. Let's get back to camp."

It was not until I had built up the fire to a cheerful crackling blaze that Louren spoke again. "I'll negotiate with the Botswana government," he said. "We'll have to have a formal agreement drawn up—probably split any finds fifty-fifty. Knowing you, Benjamin, you have a list of your requirements already made out?"

I laughed, unbuttoned my top pocket and handed him three foolscap sheets. "As a matter of fact . . ."

He glanced over them. "Very spartan, Ben. We can go in a bit bigger than this. I'll want a landing strip, to handle a Dakota transport. Also, with the hot weather, we'll need solid accommodations, not tents. And a generator for air conditioning, lighting, and to pump water."

"No one can accuse you of doing things by halves, Lo," I told him. I was jubilant that evening, and mightily pleased with myself—"celebrating" as Sally said every time she refilled my glass. I got drunk, contentedly, floating drunk. With dignity I made my own way to my tent, in which another bed had been set up for Louren. I fell on my bed fully clothed and went to sleep. I vaguely remember opening one eye when Louren came in and seeing the glow of the waning moon through the fly of the tent—or was it the first glow of dawn? It didn't seem important then.

THE personnel for the project was a most important consideration, and here I was lucky. Peter Willcox was due for his sabbatical leave from the University of Cape Town. I flew down to see him, and managed to convince him that he wouldn't enjoy the fleshpots of Europe at all. Heather, his wife, was a little harder to sway, until I showed her the photographs of the white king. As with Sally, rock art is one of her big things. They were, I knew from experience, good people to have on a dig: cheerful, knowledgeable, hardworking, both in their thirties and childless. Peter plays a very jazzy accordion and Heather has a voice that harmonizes well with mine.

Peter recommended one of his postgraduate students to me. I was startled when I first met him. Ral Davidson was a man of around twenty-one—although the fact that he was a man was not immediately obvious. However, Peter assured me that beneath all the hair lurked a very promising archaeologist.

Finally Larkin found me forty-six African laborers who had never heard of the Hills of Blood or any curse on them.

My only disappointment was with Timothy Mageba. I spent five days in Johannesburg trying to convince him that I needed him at the site. I pointed out that there were over fifteen thousand square feet of paintings, many of them symbols, stylized emblems which only he could explain.

"*Machane*," he insisted, "there is work here that no one else can do." I was to remember those words. "If you send me copies of the paintings I can still give you my interpretation."

We stared at each other for a few seconds. I could order him to come, but there was a rebellious, independent spirit smoldering in his eyes, and I knew he must have some reason for refusing.

"Is it—" I was about to ask if it was the ancient curse.

"There are always reasons within reasons, Doctor," he said. "Please believe me. My work here is at a critical stage."

So the following morning I joined my three, not four, new assistants at the Sturvesant hangar, where the Dakota was waiting.

IT WAS three weeks since I had left the Hills of Blood, and as the Dakota circled the new landing strip I could see changes—a cluster of prefabricated buildings, a metal two-thousand-gallon water tank, and beyond it the encampment housing the Africans.

Sally was waiting for us as we landed. Louren, she told me, had left the previous day. She showed us proudly over the camp. A central bungalow was divided into common room, office and storeroom. Around it were four residential huts, air-conditioned but sparsely furnished. She had allotted one of these to Peter and Heather Willcox, one to herself, one to Ral and me, and the fourth to Louren or any other visitors.

"I could think of a few improvements in the sleeping arrangements," I muttered bitterly.

"Poor Ben." Sally smiled. "Civilization has caught up with us. No more skinny dips in the pool either."

Quickly the group settled in. Sally worked on at the cavern, with one young African assistant. Each of the other three staff members was put in charge of a team of Africans and assigned a work area. Peter and Heather shrewdly elected to work outside the main walls, where the ancients would have disposed of their rubbish, old weapons, pottery, beads—all the fascinating debris of a vanished civilization. Ral, with the impetuosity of youth and dreams of treasure, jumped at the chance of excavating within the enclosure—an area which the ancients would have kept scrupulously clean and therefore less likely to yield finds. I kept myself free, as supervisor, to be wherever I could do the most good.

The first conclusive discovery we made was that the ash layer at Level I persisted throughout the site. With the help of carbon-14 dating we settled on around 450 A.D. for the formation of the ash. We agreed that the Bushman occupation of the cavern would have followed immediately after the departure or disappearance of the ancients, whoever they were.

Associated with the ash layer were scraps of unburied human remains that underlined my theory of a violent end to the City of the Moon. This was reinforced also by the baffling disappearance of the walls and towers. Ral hesitantly suggested an enemy so crazed with hatred that he had set out to obliterate all trace of the city from the earth.

"So what happened to all that masonry?" Sally asked.

"They scattered it out across the plain," Ral hazarded.

"The plain was a lake in those days. They'd have had to scatter it between cliff and lake. There's no sign of it."

There were no more ideas forthcoming, so we turned from theories to facts.

At the end of six weeks Louren visited us. All work was suspended for two days as we held a seminar to present him with our accomplishments to date. These were very impressive. To begin with, the list of artifacts, pottery shards and other relics filled 127 typewritten pages.

Peter and Heather were responsible for most of these, so they opened the seminar. "So far all excavation outside the enclosure has been confined to the area north of it. It seems to have been a complex of small buildings built of adobe and roofed with poles and thatch." Peter added details: the size of the rooms, the exact position of each object discovered. Then he concluded, "It seems, therefore, that this was a bazaar and market."

He led us through into the storeroom to examine the finds: rosettes of bronze that we guessed had embossed a leather shield, twenty-five pounds of bronze disks, stars and sun objects which were clearly ornaments, one magnificent bronze dish, about forty pounds of bronze scraps and fragments.

"The workmanship is crude," Peter told Louren, "but not recognizably Bantu in origin. It's closer to what we know of Phoenician craftsmanship, massive and rather roughly executed. Another fact that emerges is this community's veneration of the sun. Here Baal, the Phoenician male deity, was the personification of the sun."

Peter led us then to the tables of glass and pottery. "One hundred and twenty-five pounds of glass beads—predominantly blue and red. Phoenician colors. Interesting, since they must be later than 50 A.D., which is about the date of the final phase of absorption of Phoenician civilization by the Romans."

Peter indicated a large display of pottery fragments. "There is only one with any inscription." He picked up a shard and passed it to Louren. "The symbol could be a Punic T," said Peter.

Louren burst in, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Conclusive, Ben. They must accept that, surely?"

"By no means, Lo. They will cry, 'Imported.' It's the old trick of discrediting anything you can't explain by saying it was brought in by traders." I grinned. "But at least we haven't uncovered a chamber pot with Queen Victoria's portrait on it!"

Laughing, we moved on to the copper display: bangles and brooches, green and eaten away; bales of wire; and, significantly, twelve-pound ingots cast in the shape of a St. Andrew's cross.

"Those aren't anything new," Louren remarked.

I agreed with him. "They turn up all over central and southern Africa. And yet the shape is exactly that of the ingots cast from

the tin of Cornwall by the Phoenicians—or the copper ingots from ancient Cyprus."

"Still not conclusive?"

I shook my head, and led him on to the ironwork: arrowheads, spearheads and sword blades, all badly rusted. "Judging by the quantities of weapons," I suggested, "the ancients were either a warlike people or fearful of attack and well armed against it." We moved on to my photographs of each stage of the excavations.

"Pretty good," Louren admitted. "Is that all you have for me?"

"The best comes last." I couldn't resist a little showmanship. I had screened off the end of the storeroom. I led him past the first screen with all my team waiting anxiously to see his reaction.

"Good God!" Louren stopped short and stared at the phallic columns with their ornamental tops. The three pillars stood about five feet high and were thirty inches in circumference. Only one of them was relatively undamaged. The carving on top of each depicted a vulturine bird with heavy beak, hunched shoulders and predatory claws.

"Zimbabwe birds!" he exclaimed.

Indeed, they were very like those recovered from Zimbabwe by Hall, MacIver and others. "Not Zimbabwe birds," I corrected Louren. "These are the ones from which the Zimbabwe birds were copied. They came from the temple"—I smiled at Ral—"within the enclosure. You see the sun symbols around the columns—clearly they were associated with the worship of Baal."

"We have named them the sunbirds," Sally explained.

"They're very interesting, Ben." Louren's eyes were drawn to the final screen at the end of the storeroom. "What have you got behind there?"

"What the whole colonization was based on—gold!"

There is something about that beautiful buttery metal that holds the imagination captive. A hush came over the party as we stared at it. We had carefully cleaned the objects, and their surfaces shone with that special soft radiance which is unmistakably gold. There were fifteen rods as thick and as long as a man's finger, and forty-eight pieces of crudely wrought jewelry. There was a statuette of a female figure four and a half inches tall.

"Astarte—Tanith," Sally whispered. "Goddess of the moon and the earth."

In addition there were a handful of gold beads and dozens of sun disks, all more than enough to keep us locked in discussion on into the early hours.

The next day Sally, helped by Heather Willcox, presented her drawings and paintings from the cavern. When she showed the tracing of the white king, a frown of concentration creased Louren's brow. He bent to examine it more closely.

At last he looked up at Sally. "I'd like you to make a copy of this for my own personal collection. Would you?"

"With the greatest pleasure." She smiled happily at him. Like most beautiful women, she is not completely averse to the limelight. She knew her work was good, and she liked the plaudits.

After dinner that evening I worked for an hour in my darkroom, developing three rolls of film, and when I finished I went to look for Louren. He was to leave for London the next morning and there was much for us to discuss. But he wasn't to be found. "I think he's gone up to the cavern, Doctor," Ral told me. "He borrowed a flashlight."

I fetched my own flashlight and set off through the silent grove. "Louren!" I called at the entrance to the tunnel. "Are you there?"

My voice bounced hollowly, and there was silence when the echoes died. Flashing my light into the darkness, ducking my head under the zooming flight of the bats, I went on down the passage to the cavern. Suddenly the beam of another, more powerful light shone full in my eyes. "Louren?" I asked. "Is that you?"

"What do you want, Ben?" he demanded from the darkness behind the flashlight. He sounded irritable, angry even.

"I want to talk to you about the plans for the next step."

"It can wait until tomorrow."

"You're leaving early—let's talk now." I started to cross the cave toward him, averting my eyes from the dazzling beam.

"Are you deaf? I said tomorrow, damn you!"

I stopped dead, stunned. He had never spoken to me like that in my life before. "Lo, are you all right?" I asked anxiously.

"Ben!" His voice crackled. "Just turn around and walk out of

here, will you? I'll see you tomorrow morning." I hesitated. Then, still confused, I turned and walked back down the passage, aware that something was wrong.

In the morning, however, Louren was as charming as only he could be. He apologized handsomely for the previous evening. "I just wanted to be alone, Ben. I'm sorry."

In the ten minutes before he flew out for London we agreed not to make any public announcement of our discovery yet. The evidence of a Phoenician occupation of the city was encouraging, but only circumstantial.

THE weeks that followed were dissatisfying for me. Although the work on the ruins went forward steadily, none of it added a scrap of knowledge to our store. I roved the site restlessly, praying that the next spadeful of earth turned would expose an inscribed pallet or the headstone to a burial vault.

At the same time my relationship with Sally had deteriorated in some subtle fashion which I was at a loss to explain. Naturally there had been no opportunity for any physical intimacy since the arrival of the others, for she was determined not to let our affair become common knowledge. She worked with fierce concentration at her easel during the day and usually slipped away to her hut immediately after dinner.

It was distressing for me to see my laughing Sally so withdrawn, and finally I visited her at work. "I want to talk to you, Sal."

"What about?" She looked at me with mild surprise, as though it were the first time in days that she had noticed me.

"Is something wrong, Sal?"

"Good Lord, should there be?" She seemed to suggest that I was prying into affairs that did not concern me. I wanted to shout, "I'm your lover, damn you! Everything you do concerns me!"

Instead I took her hand and told her softly, "I love you, Sally. Just remember that. If there's ever anything I can do . . ."

It was probably the best thing I could have said, for her hand tightened on mine and her face softened. "Ben, you are a sweet dear person. Don't take any notice of me for a while. I've just got the blues. They'll go away if you don't fuss."

THE FOLLOWING WEEK I had to go to the annual meeting of the trustees of the institute in Johannesburg. Also I was committed to a series of lectures for the faculty of archaeology at the University of Witwatersrand. I would be away for eleven days.

The trustees' meeting was the type of festive affair which can be expected when funds are unlimited and prospects good. From the chair Louren was most complimentary as he renewed my contract as director of the institute. To celebrate a thirty percent rise in my remuneration, he gave a dinner in my honor at his home. Forty people sat down in the huge dining room. Hilary, wearing the fabled Sturvesant diamonds, gave me her almost undivided attention and when, at two in the morning, she and Louren escorted me to my car, I swaggered along seven feet tall.

This confidence carried me through my lecture series, and I was prevailed upon to return at an early date—there was even a strong hint from the vice-chancellor that the archaeology chair would fall vacant the following year.

For the last three days of my visit I spent every minute at the institute. With relief I found that my staff had kept things running smoothly. The day before I was to fly back, I told Timothy Mageba about the cave paintings and the white king, and mentioned the feeling I sometimes had in their presence, that I could send my mind back along those hundreds of years.

"Yes, *machane*, I have told you that you and I are both marked by the spirits, and we both have the sight. It is merely that you have not been taught to develop it."

"You say that you are marked, as I am, by the spirits?"

As Timothy looked at me I thought at first I had insulted him by too direct a question. But suddenly he nodded, stood up, and locked the door of his office. Then he stripped shoe and sock from his right foot, and showed it to me.

The deformity was shocking, although I had seen photographs of the condition before. It was known as ostrich foot: a massive division between the metatarsus of the big toe and second toe made the foot resemble a claw. Timothy was obviously sensitive about it, and at once replaced his sock and shoe.

"Both feet?" I asked, and he nodded. "Does it hinder you at all?"

"No," he answered brusquely. "We of the cloven feet outrun the fleetest antelope."

I would have discussed it further, but I was warned by his expression. We chatted of other things, and then I said good-by.

I WAS awakened at three in the morning by an insistent knocking on my door. I shrugged into a dressing gown. "Who's there?" I called. The knocking stopped.

"It's me, Doctor. Timothy." He sounded agitated.

I opened the door. His white shirt was spotted with fresh blood. A grubby cloth was wrapped around his left forearm. "Good Lord, Timothy, what have you done to your arm?"

"I fell in the dark against the windowpane of my front door."

"You'd better let me have a look at it."

"No, Doctor. It's only a scratch. What I have come to tell you is far more important."

"Come in and sit down. Can I get you a drink?"

"A drink, thank you, *machane*. As you see, I am upset. That is how I came to injure my arm."

I poured both of us whisky. "What is it, Timothy?" I prompted.

"It is difficult to begin. Yesterday we spoke about the City of the Moon. You told me of mysteries there that baffle you."

"Yes." I nodded encouragement.

"Since then I have thought heavily on this matter, going back in my memory over all the legends of our people, and there was something, a shadow, a dark memory that eluded me. I could not grasp it, and my sleep was greatly troubled by the dream demons. Until—" He hesitated. "Until my grandfather came to me. I know you are not a believer, but . . ."

"Go on, Timothy." My voice croaked a little. Timothy's grandfather had lain twenty-five years in his grave.

"He said to me, Doctor, he said, 'Go with the blessed one to the Hills of Blood and I will make the mysteries known to you.'"

I felt my skin prickle. Timothy had said the Hills of Blood—and nobody had told him that name.

"The Hills of Blood?" I repeated.

"I can only believe he meant your City of the Moon."

"So now you do want to come with me tomorrow?"

"I will come. And perhaps I will be able to show you something for which you search. What time will you leave?"

I glanced at my watch. "In less than three hours. At six."

"Then I must hurry home and pack."

His old blue Chevy was in one of the airport parking slots when I drove up. He was standing by it, huddled into a blue windbreaker. There were lines of pain cut into his forehead.

I felt a twinge of concern. "Are you all right?"

"My arm is a little painful, Doctor, but I've had it attended to." It was in a sling, freshly bandaged.

"All right, then." I smiled at him. "Let's go."

Roger van Deventer, the pilot, had started the engines of the Dakota and they were ticking over. I phoned the airport officials and had no trouble getting clearance for the Sturvesant plane's flight to Botswana. As I led the way across the concrete the three black ground crewmen inexplicably left their positions beside the landing gear and began walking rapidly toward me.

"Doctor!" Timothy's voice behind me. I turned. It took me a second to see that he had a short-barreled submachine gun pointed at my belly. I gaped at him.

"I am sorry, Doctor," he said softly, "but it is necessary."

Two of the blacks gripped my arms. Timothy raised his voice without taking his eyes off me. "Come," he called in Venda.

Five people came through the outer door of the hangar. I recognized two men and two girls as Bantu assistants from the institute. These four carried stubby submachine guns also, and between them they supported a badly wounded stranger. "Get him into the plane," Timothy ordered crisply.

All this time I had stood dumbly, paralyzed with shock, but now I regained my wits. I braced my legs, leaned forward slightly and heaved. The men on my arms shot forward like thrown darts, crashing headlong into Timothy and knocking him down in a heap.

"Roger!" I shouted, hoping my voice would carry over the sound of the aircraft engines. "Radio! Get help!"

The third ground crewman locked an arm around my throat.

I took him at wrist and elbow and wrenched against the joint. His elbow went, and he screamed like a girl.

"Help!" I yelled, but the engines drowned my cry. Timothy was scrambling to his feet, and I lunged at him, leopard-mad, hating him for this betrayal. One of the girls hit me with the steel butt of her gun. I felt it cut into my scalp. Blows rained on my head and shoulders and I went down.

"Get him into the aircraft." Timothy's voice.

They dragged me across the cold, oily concrete and threw me heavily onto the metal floor of the plane. Blinking the blood out of my eyes, I saw the white ground engineer and his regular black crewmen lying there, bound and gagged. They were stripped of their overalls, which the gang had used to impersonate them.

Rough hands hustled me into the radio compartment and tied me so tightly into a seat that the ropes bit painfully into my flesh. I turned my head, looking into the cockpit. Roger was at the controls, with a gun pressed against the back of his head.

"Take off," said Timothy. "Observe all routine procedures."

Roger nodded jerkily, and minutes later we were airborne. "You will fly to Botswana," Timothy told him. "Once you are over the border I will give you a new course."

The tense black faces had relaxed after our takeoff, and there were a few nervous laughs. Apart from the ones who had overwhelmed me, there were five others, who must have captured Roger and the ground crew. The wounded man and the one I had damaged were laid out on the floor of the cargo hold, and the rest began changing into camouflage paratrooper uniforms. I had already formed a working idea of their motives, but now I saw their red star shoulder patches and my last doubts were dispelled.

Timothy switched on the radio set beside me, and immediately all attention was fixed on the announcer's voice: "This is the South African Broadcasting Corporation. The time is seven o'clock and here is the news. A spokesman for the South African police states that at 2:15 a.m. a detachment of the security police raided a farmhouse on the outskirts of Johannesburg. A pitched battle between police and a large gang armed with automatic weapons ensued. Elements of the gang escaped in four motorcars. Initial

reports are that eight were shot dead and four captured. A full-scale police hunt is now in progress. It is with deep regret that we announce the deaths of three members of the police force—"

A ragged cheer rang out through the aircraft, and one or two of the gang clenched their fists in the Communist salute.

"Congratulations," I murmured sarcastically to Timothy.

He looked down at me. "Death is ugly, slavery is worse," he said evenly. "Doctor, there is a bond between us."

I fought against the ropes. "Don't give me your Communist cant," I told him. "You want to soak our land in blood. There is no bond between us—except that of the knife."

One of the gang lifted his submachine gun. "No!" shouted Timothy. "We need him alive. Just tell Mary to bring the morphine."

It took five of them to hold me still for the hypodermic. My last memory was hearing Timothy give Roger a new course to fly.

PAIN and thirst woke me. I tried to sit up, and cried out.

"Are you all right, Doctor?" It was Roger. My head was a blinding agony as I focused my eyes on him, and then on the bare, whitewashed room. Wooden bunks and a lavatory bucket were all the furnishings, and the door was barred. The three black ground crewmen sat on one of the bunks looking lost.

"Where are we?" I whispered.

"Zambia. Some sort of military camp. We landed an hour ago."

For four days we stayed in the airless, ovenlike room with its stinking bucket. On the fifth day our guards came to fetch us. With much shouting and punching I was marched down a corridor and into an office adorned with a portrait of Chairman Mao.

Timothy Mageba rose from behind the desk. "Sit down, Doctor, please." He wore the uniform of a colonel in the Chinese People's Army. Half a dozen bottles of beer stood on a tray. Timothy opened one, bedewed with cold, and offered it to me.

I shook my head. "I don't drink with murderers."

"I see." He nodded, and I saw regret in his eyes. He lifted the bottle and drank a mouthful. "Please understand," he went on, "the policemen, the killings—I did not mean it to happen."

"When the stink of our country's dead sickens even your dark

spirit," I said, "will you still cry out 'I did not mean it to happen'?"

He turned away to look out the window at squads of uniformed Bantu drilling under a dazzling sun. Then he faced me again. "I have been able to arrange for your release, Doctor. You will all be returned in the Dakota. My heart cries out to see you go, *machane*, for you are a man of gentleness." He spoke in Venda.

"My heart weeps also," I answered in the same language. "For a man who was a friend and who is now dead to me."

It was true, I realized. Beneath my anger there was a deep sense of loss. I had believed in him. I had seen in such a man a hope for the future of this tormented continent of ours. For a moment we looked at each other regretfully.

"Good-by, Doctor," he said softly. "Go in peace, *machane*."

Two air force Mirages picked up our Dakota an hour after we crossed the Zambezi River and escorted us to the military airfield at Voortrekker Hoogte. Once a doctor had dressed the gashes in my head, I was hustled away to a meeting with four grimly polite officers of the police and military intelligence.

"Did you recommend Mageba for the Sturvesant travel scholarship, Dr. Kazin?"

"Did you know that he went to China and received training as a guerrilla leader?"

"Did you sign these customs declarations for twenty-seven drums of fuller's earth from Hong Kong?" I recognized my signature. "Were you aware that this shipment actually contained one hundred and fifty pounds of plastique explosives?"

The questions went on endlessly. Terrorist propaganda pamphlets in a dozen African languages had been printed clandestinely on the institute press, submachine guns and ammunition imported in cases of books addressed to the institute.

"Mageba was a protégé of yours for twelve years, Doctor. Do you mean to tell us that you never discussed politics with him?"

I think I must have fainted then. I woke in a hospital room, and I felt choked with relief to see Louren sitting beside the bed.

"Okay, Ben." He spoke with infinite gentleness. "It's okay, partner. I've fixed it. It's all over now, Ben."

Afterward he would not let me go back to my bachelor quarters at the institute, and I was installed in a guest suite at the Sturvesant residence. For ten idyllic days I was spoiled by Hilary and fussed over by the children, protected from the news-hungry press and sheltered from the alarums of the outside world.

In one unpleasant daylong session I told the story of the hijacking at the public inquiry, and afterward faced the press. Then I flew back to the City of the Moon, to a hero's welcome. They had followed my adventures on the radio, and now they sat around me in a circle while I told the whole story again.

TEN days after my return, Ral and I made an important discovery. We had known that if walls and towers had stood here, then the rock must have been brought from nearby. As we were coming down the gap in the cliffs that night on our regular route to and from the top, Ral looked closely at the steep sides of the gap and suddenly said, "Doc! This is it!"

We realized that we were standing on steps cut by the ancients into their quarry. Thick undergrowth had covered the neat terraces from which they had sawed the red stone. We found some half-formed blocks of masonry still *in situ*, almost unweathered in the protected gully, the marks of the saw as fresh as if the workmen had laid their tools down the day before.

The whole team helped to clear the quarry. They were jubilant, for to tell the truth we had all been a little down with the recent lack of progress. Ral and I set about surveying the quarry so we could calculate the amount of stone removed from it. It was impossible to measure the irregular excavation accurately, but we decided that approximately six hundred thousand cubic yards of finished blocks had been removed. From that we could guess at the size of the completed city. That night in camp we pushed off from these fairly factual figures into a sea of conjecture.

"Here—let me do that!" Irritably Sally took the paintbrush out of my hand after ten minutes of watching my efforts at reconstructing a complete elevation of the city.

"I think the taper on your main walls is a little excessive," Peter murmured. "If you compare the walls at Zimbabwe—"

And so it became a group project. Night after night, with everybody contributing from their own areas of the dig and their own talents and interests, we built up a series of pictures of our city.

Massive red walls, ornamented with the chevron patterns of the waves that made Phoenicia great. Red walls that caught the rays of the setting sun, the evening blessing of the great sun god Baal. Tall towers, symbols of fertility and prosperity. Beyond them the vertical gash in the cliffs that led into the mysterious cavern. Surely this was sacred to Astarte—more commonly worshipped by the Carthaginians as Tanith—goddess of earth and moon?

We knew that the Phoenicians made human sacrifice to their gods. Wondering what dreadful ritual our emerald pool had seen, we depicted the victim dressed in gold and finery, poised on the pool's edge, with the high priest lifting the sacrificial knife.

Ral had found a gate through the west wall. "From the gate a road would have led to the harbor," Sally said, and started to paint in ships lying on the beach, huge biremes with their prows shaped like rams' heads, covered with gilt and enamel.

The walls and towers rose again as our painting grew, and the harbor and taverns were peopled with hosts dead for two thousand years. Warriors strutted, slaves whined, noble ladies rode in their litters, caravans poured in from the land to the east laden with gold and treasure, and a white king rode out through the great stone gates with a rosetted shield on his shoulder and his armor sparkling in the sun.

Just as the last touches were going into our picture, Peter discovered the shipyards suggested by Sally's imagined biremes. He found a keel laid on the slip. The unfinished vessel had been burned, and only imagination and faith could recognize it as a ship. I knew my scientific opponents would challenge it, but carbon 14 on the charred wood gave approximately the same date we had identified from the ash layer as that of the "great fire."

This collective project had given me an excuse to spend more time with Sally. Soon we were back in our friendly bantering relationship, and we took to having lunch again at the pool. Only once did I refer back to our more intimate association.

"Have you still got the blues, Sal?"

She gave me a long, frank gaze before replying. "I need time, Ben. There's something I have to work out with myself."

I smiled as cheerfully as I could, and resigned myself to wait.

FIVE weeks after my return I went up to the cavern with good news. "Larkin on the radio, Sal. Louren's arriving tomorrow."

She hardly looked up from her work. I was disappointed in her reaction. I thought she had begun to like him.

I went to meet him at the airstrip. He had lost twenty pounds and his skin was chalky gray; beneath his eyes were smears that looked like bruises.

"My God, Lo—you look terrible. Are you sick or something?"

"I've been on a rough one, Ben," he confided as he climbed into the Land-Rover. "Four weeks at the bargaining table for some mining concessions that I couldn't trust anyone else to handle. The other side sent in teams, changing them when they were worn out."

"You're going to kill yourself," I scolded, like a nagging wife. He leaned across, punched my arm lightly and laughed.

"You're right, partner. I do feel a little spent. So I'm getting right away for a week, and you're coming with me."

"What do you mean?"

"Tell you later. Just now, take me straight to the cavern." His voice went soft and reflective. "When things got really tough there at the table, I'd think about the peace of that place." He stopped, embarrassed. He doesn't often talk that way.

Sally was working at the rear wall of the cavern. She wore a green silk blouse and tailored khaki slacks, her hair loose and shiny. As she looked up from her easel I observed with mild surprise that she had on lipstick. I saw from the concern in her eyes that she noticed Louren's haggard features, but she said nothing about it. Her greeting was almost offhand.

Louren went at once to the portrait of the white king. The three of us sat in a relaxed silence examining it. "Do you get the feeling he's trying to tell you something, Ben?" Louren said.

"No, Lo, I can't say that I do."

"There's something here, Ben," he said with certainty. "Something you—we—have overlooked. The key to the whole place,

where is it?" He stared at me, as though I had hidden whatever it was. "Where is it, Ben? The floor, the walls, the roof?"

"And the pool," I said. "But it's too deep, Lo. No diver I know—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Ben—who's the best diver in the world?"

"Cousteau, I suppose."

"So I'll get my people on to him. That takes care of the pool."

Dealing with Louren is like being caught in a hurricane. At the end of an hour he had a thorough investigation of the cavern outlined. "Okay, Ben," he finished casually. "Why don't you go on back to camp? I'd like an hour or so alone here."

I stood up immediately, if reluctantly. "Coming, Sal?"

"Oh, Ben, I'm in the middle of—"

"She won't disturb me," Louren said. So I left them there.

WE WERE all sick of our diet of canned goods. Louren had brought a load of fresh food, and that night we had a suckling pig, golden brown in its suit of crackling, with roast potatoes, green peas and a gigantic bowl of salad. There was very little talk. But once the dishes were cleared and I had refilled the glasses, we settled in a circle about Louren. First I told him about the quarry and what we had deduced from it. This led to an exhibition of Sally's reconstructions of the city. I had thought he might at best be mildly amused by them, but he worked himself into a fever of excitement, jumping up to examine each new sketch.

"Ben!" His voice was husky. "This is remarkable—until this evening, this was all just intriguing blocks of stone. I never really thought about the *people*. These men who built something magnificent in the wilderness—" He shook his head slowly, considering the magnitude, the grandeur of it. "Ben, we've *got* to find out what happened to these people and their city."

As we were eating lunch beside the emerald pool the following day, Louren told me how he and I were to get away together. He drew a map with Sally's charcoal on a flat rock. "Here we are. Sixty-five miles to the northeast are the ruins at Domboshaba. If your theories are correct, then there must have been a caravan route between the two cities. You and I are going to take the Land-Rover and try to pick it up."

IT TOOK US MOST OF the first day to find a way over the Hills of Blood that our vehicle could negotiate. By nightfall, however, we were in open savanna, camping astride what we hoped was the caravan route. In the dawn Louren rolled out of his sleeping bag, massaging his back. "I've just remembered I'm not twenty any longer," he groaned.

But soon he was looking twenty. The sun tanned him again, the bruises under his eyes were gone and he laughed freely. We were in no hurry, and we enjoyed every mile as we groped our way north and east through country that changed its character with the bewitching rapidity that is Africa's alone.

On our third night we camped by a pool in a grove of masasa trees, clad in their outlandish spring foliage which is the color of no other tree on earth—pink, soft beige, flaming red. Louren had shot a young impala ram during the day, and he wrapped the fillets in bacon and roasted them in a heavy iron pot while I made a sauce of onions and tomato and garlic.

In the middle of the next morning we saw a vast wheel of vultures circling slowly beneath the hard blue sky. Following the flight of these grotesque scavengers is one of the most intriguing invitations that Africa has to offer, for every time they will lead you to the scene of some desperate incident in the never-ending drama of the wilderness.

"A couple of miles off," Louren commented, peering eagerly ahead through the windshield. I shared his curiosity.

A quarter of a mile ahead, Louren stopped the Land-Rover, and changed the solid bullets in his big .375 Magnum for soft-nosed ones that would deliver a heavier knockdown blow. "We'll walk up," he said. "I'd love a chance at a big black-maned lion. Take the shotgun, Ben."

We rested briefly at noon, and soon after that we discovered elephant spoor. There goes any further pretense of looking for caravan routes, I thought, as I watched Louren's face light up. He unslung the heavy rifle from his shoulder, and we went on, but slowly now, searching the impenetrable thickets ahead of us.

Suddenly the elephant loomed ghostly in the gray thorn, moving away from us in a leisurely fashion, gray skin hanging in

wrinkled bags at the belly, the knuckles of the spine showing clearly on his back. Old elephant. Big elephant. The animal was completely unaware of danger, and Louren took a firing stance.

The shot was stunningly loud. I heard the bullet slap into the flesh, and the elephant spun away from the impact, then turned to face Louren, its long yellow tusks lifted high, squealing in anger. Then it charged. Louren's field of fire was blanketed by a thicket of thorns. I saw him turn and run out to one side, trying for a clear shot. His foot hit an anteater's hole and he fell, the rifle flying from his hand, full in the path of the charge.

"Louren!" I screamed, and then I was running, armed with only the shotgun, to head off the wounded bull elephant. "Here!" I yelled at it as I ran. "Here!" I saw Louren on hands and knees crawling painfully toward his rifle.

Suddenly the bull checked, swinging his head toward me, and at thirty yards' range I aimed for his eyes, hoping to blind him. *Blam! Blam!* I fired into his face, and he came at me. I had taken him off Louren—that was all that counted.

"Run, Ben, run!" Louren's voice. But my legs would not function, and I stood stupidly in the path of the bull. The blast of Louren's rifle crashed out, twice, and like an avalanche the gray mountain, already dead, fell toward me. The outflung trunk hit me with savage force, and I felt myself thrown into the air.

"You silly bastard! Oh, you silly, brave little bastard!" Louren's voice spoke to me down a long dark tunnel. I opened my eyes. My head was cradled in Louren's lap.

"Who are you calling a bastard?" I croaked up at him, and the expression of relief that flooded his worried features was one of the most satisfying things I have ever seen.

I was stiff and sore, but I found I could walk. We camped where we were. Louren cooked us a meal of elephant tongue and kept a bonfire going to warm us. Next morning we started back to the City of the Moon.

THE night we arrived back at the city we talked a lot, sang a little, and drank whisky until at last Louren said, "Bed! I must fly back to the salt mines first thing in the morning. It means an early start."

He rose to go, then paused. "Ben, you promised to let me take back photographs of the rock painting, the white king."

"Sure, Lo." I went and dug a sheaf of prints out of my files.

Under the light Louren shuffled through them. "What's wrong with this one, Ben?" he asked. "There's a mark on the face."

I saw it too, a faint shadowy cross which marred the death-white face. "Is it on the other prints?" I asked, puzzled.

"No. Just that one."

I handed it back to him. "Just a faulty print," I said.

"Okay." Louren accepted my explanation. "Good night."

I never gave the mark on the white king's face another thought.

THE next two months passed swiftly. Ral and I devoted ourselves to a thorough excavation of the cavern floor, but the results were meager. Reluctantly, I planned to shut down the dig on the first of August, and we spent the last weeks of July tidying it all, packing our treasures with loving care, making the last entries in the piles of notebooks. The Dakota arrived to take away the first load of crates, and with it went Peter and Heather Willcox, to travel in Europe for the few months left of Peter's sabbatical.

One evening Louren spoke to me over the radio. "We've got hold of Cousteau at last, Ben. He thinks he may be able to help, but he has a full schedule for the next eight months."

That took away my last excuse for staying on. Sally and I began packing the thousands of photographs. Now and then we would pause to examine one or laugh over another. Finally we came to the file of prints of the white king. They were taken from every angle, with every variation of lighting and printing technique.

"My beautiful, mysterious king," Sally sighed. "Isn't there anything more you can tell us?"

Suddenly something crossed my mind. "Sal," I said.

"What is it, Ben?" She picked up my quaver of excitement.

"The light! Remember how we found the city in the moonlight? The angle and intensity of the light was important?"

She nodded eagerly.

"Well, there was a mark on the print I gave to Lo."

"What about it?" Sally asked.

"I don't know. But I'm damn well going to find out." I took two flashlights out of the cupboard. "Follow me, Watson."

"Where are we going?"

I went to the small refrigerated cabinet which housed my stock of film. "To the cavern. To take some photographs."

I filled my camera with infrared film, and fitted a special filter over the lens. Sally pestered me with questions. "Wait and see," I told her.

I took two arc lights up with us, and an extension cord for the electrical outlet near the water pump. We arrived at the white king just after midnight. I used direct frontal lighting and made twenty exposures at varying speeds and aperture settings. Sally was nearly expiring with curiosity, and finally I took pity on her.

"This is the technique they use for photographing canvases and picking out signatures and details overlaid by other paint—things which are invisible to the human eye. The filter takes out everything but the infrared rays, and the film is sensitive to those. It will reflect any temperature or texture differences in the subject and show them in different colors."

There was an hour's work in the darkroom before I could project the images onto our viewing screen. Now the colors were altered—the king's face green, his beard purple—and there were strange dapplings and spots. But what held my attention and set my pulses pounding was the grid of regular oblong shapes that underlay the entire image. "We've got to get Louren back," I blurted.

"I don't understand. What does it mean?" Sally pleaded.

"It means that behind our white king is an opening in the wall which was closed off. The white king was painted over it later."

LOUREN stood before the rock wall and stared angrily at the white king. "That thing," he said, "is one of the world's great works of art. It's two thousand years old. It's irreplaceable—"

"I know," I said. Sally and Ral stood watching.

"It doesn't belong to us. It belongs to our children."

"I know," I said again. But I knew more than that. I had watched Louren over the months, and I knew this portrait had developed some deep significance for him.

"Now you want to destroy it," he said, pacing back and forth.

"Couldn't we—" Sally began timidly, but her voice faded out as Louren spun around and glared at her.

"Yes?" he demanded.

"Well, I mean sort of go behind it? Drill a passage in the wall off to one side and then turn back behind the king?"

I felt like throwing my arms around her neck and kissing her.

LOUREN flew up one of his mine captains with a crack team of Mashona rock breakers from his nearest gold mine. They brought an air compressor, pneumatic drills, all the paraphernalia of their trade. The mine captain, a big, ginger-haired man named Tinus van Vuuren, threw himself wholeheartedy into the project.

"I want the smallest opening you can work in," Sally told him. "I want as little damage as possible done to the paintings."

"Lady"—Tinus turned to her earnestly—"I'll cut you a hole no bigger than a mouse's"—he cut himself short—"ear hole."

Sally and I taped the outline of where Tinus's shaft would be cut, thirty feet away from the white king to prevent vibrations from the drills loosening flakes of stone or paint. Though we made the opening a mere two feet by four, we would still destroy part of a lovely group of giraffes.

The night before Tinus was set to begin we entertained him in the common room. The atmosphere was similar to that of a fighter squadron on the eve of a dangerous sortie. We were voluble and tense, and all of us were drinking a little too much. At first Tinus was overawed by the company of the legendary Louren Sturvesant, but the brandy soon loosened him up, and he joined in the conversation. "What do you want the respirators for, Doc?"

"Respirators?" Louren broke off a private conversation with Sally. "Who ordered respirators?" he demanded.

I rescued poor Tinus. "I ordered them, Lo. You see, we're hoping to find"—I was about to say a tomb, but I didn't want to tempt the gods—"a cave of some sort. It will have been sealed, airtight, for a couple of thousand years, so there will be a danger of—"

"The curse of the pharaohs!" Sally interjected. "Don't you remember what happened to the men who first entered Tutankha-

men's tomb?" She drew a finger across her throat and rolled her eyes horribly. She was onto her second Scotch.

"Sally, you ought to know better," I said severely. "The curse of the pharaohs is a complete myth. But the conditions in the tomb would have been ideal for the development of *cryptococcus neuromyces*, a fungoid growth whose airborne spores are the cause of a peculiarly unpleasant lung disease. The spores are breathed into the lungs, where they germinate—"

"What are the consequences?" Louren interrupted.

"Primarily lesions of the lung tissue, with hemorrhaging, and rapid, painful breathing. Then the fungoid colonies begin generating wastes which are carried to the central nervous system."

"My God!" Tinus was horrified. "Then what happens?"

"The wastes act as a neurotoxin and hallucinogen, not unlike lysergic acid or mescalin. There can be severe brain malfunction."

"Fatal?" asked Louren.

"Can be. It depends on individual immunity."

"Hell, man," said Tinus, "I don't know as I'm so keen on this deal. This fungus thing—it's creepy. Plain bloody creepy."

"What precautions are you taking, Ben?" Louren asked.

"The first party will be protected by respirators. Then I'll take air and dust samples for examination. If it's there, every dust sample will be full of it. You can't miss it under the microscope."

Louren nodded, and smiled at Tinus. "Satisfied?"

Tinus took a deep breath. "I'll trust Dr. Kazin," he said.

THEY cut the tunnel swiftly, shoring the walls with heavy timbers, and strung electric lights along the roof. Thirty feet in, Tinus cut out a large chamber from which he drove a new tunnel at a ninety-degree angle to the left, aimed at the area behind the painting of the white king. On the third day Tinus and I crouched behind the Bantu drillers in the new tunnel as they began the assault on what we had calculated must be the last few feet of rock.

The noise was thunderous, and despite ventilation fans the heat was appalling. The sweat poured down inside the face mask of my respirator. The tension was becoming almost unbearable, when suddenly a drill slid unresisting into its hole. The driller shut off

his drill, and now our labored breathing was the only sound there.

Through, I thought, we've holed through into God knows what. I saw my own excitement reflected in Tinus's blue eyes. I nodded at him, and he dismissed the men with a jerk of his thumb.

Gingerly, he and I withdrew the drill from its hole. A wisp of fine dust followed it out, smoking in the harsh glare of the lights. Then I jerked my head at Tinus, and he followed his gang back out of the tunnel.

I worked on alone, using a long plastic rod with a piece of sterile cloth attached to the end of it to probe beyond the drill hole to its limit. The probe ran fourteen feet into the rock before meeting resistance, and when I withdrew it the cloth was thick with gray, floury dust. In all I collected six separate samples.

There was a microscope set up for me in the rock chamber. One quick scrutiny was sufficient, but I doggedly inspected all the samples before I ripped off my respirator. Then I went out into the cavern, where they were all waiting impatiently.

"We've drilled into a cavity," I shouted, "and it's clean!"

LOUREN would let no one else work with me at the face, though Ral and Sally were clearly breaking their hearts to do so. The two of us chipped away for three days at the drill hole, enlarging it until we had exposed a massive slab of red sandstone. Identical slabs butted it on either side, and it appeared to carry across it the crosspieces of an equally massive stone lintel.

We used two heavy hydraulic jacks to take the strain of the lintel off the slab. Then we drilled into the slab itself so we could attach two ring bolts to it. We hooked a steel chain through the bolts, and with a heavy ratchet winch we began to haul the slab out of its seating. We knelt side by side, each of us straining against the winch, taking up the pull one pawl at a time. With each click of the ratchet the chain moved a sixteenth of an inch.

"All the way, partner," Louren gasped beside me.

"All the way, Lo." My body arched like a drawn bow, I felt the muscles in my back near to tearing. At last, with a soft, grating sound, the great slab swung slowly and fell heavily to the tunnel floor. Beyond it was a square black opening.

We lay there, fighting for breath and staring into that sinister hole. There was a stale, long-dead smell as the air trapped for two thousand years gushed out.

"Come on!" Louren snatched up one of the electric bulbs in its little wire cage, and crawled through the opening. The extension cable slithered after him like a snake, and I followed.

We stood side by side, Louren holding the light above his head, and peered into the moving, mysterious shadows. We found ourselves in a long passage that ended against a blank wall of stone. Later we measured the passage and found it was 155 feet long, eight feet six inches high and ten feet wide. Recesses were let into the walls, ten on each side. These were seven feet wide and five feet deep, and reached from floor to roof height. Each was fitted with stone shelves on which stood rank upon rank of pottery jars.

"It's a storeroom," Louren said. My heart was hammering.

"Probably wine or corn in the jars." I sneezed as our movements stirred the dust and it found its way into our nostrils.

Louren took a step. "What's this?" he said. Scattered on the floor lay dozens of lumpy objects, singly and in heaps, shapeless under the dust. I told him to hold up the lamp, crouched over one of them, then drew back with an involuntary exclamation. Through the dust a face stared up at me. The eyes were dark holes, the dried lips had shrunk to expose yellow teeth.

"Dead men," Louren said. "Dozens of them! It looks as if they must have been killed in a fight."

"It must have been a hell of a fight," I said with awe. Bodies were piled on each other like the debris of a hurricane.

"It was," Louren said softly.

I turned to him in surprise. "What do you mean, 'it was'? How do you know that?"

Louren's eyes were glowing with some inner excitement. He seemed not to see me for a second. "Hey?" he said, puzzled.

"Why did you say that, as though you knew?"

"Did I? I don't know. I meant—it must have been."

We moved on slowly, stepping over the dead men, peering into each recess. Of one thing only was I certain. This discovery was something to rank with Leakey's discoveries at Olduvai Gorge,

something to dazzle the world of archaeology. The end of the passage was another panel of sandstone, but this was decorated. A swirling, stylized engraving of the sun image, three feet in diameter, which evoked in me a strange, reverential awe.

Louren turned and looked back down the passage. "Is that all?" he asked in an irritable tone. "There must be something more."

It was a shock. He was actually disappointed. For me the universe could hold no richer prize. "What the hell do you want?" I demanded. "Gold and diamonds and an ivory sarcophagus? You know what's wrong with you, Louren Sturvesant? You're bloody well spoiled!" I sensed his anger, but rushed on. "I've worked for this all my life, and now I achieve it, and what do you do?"

"Hey, Ben!" I saw comprehension in his eyes suddenly. "I didn't mean it that way. I'm not knocking your achievement. I just—" He punched my shoulder. "Come on, let's see what's in these pots."

"We shouldn't disturb them. Not till we've charted—"

"There are thousands of them. We'll just snaffle one."

He wasn't asking permission, not Louren Sturvesant. Already he was making his way back to where one of the jars lay beside a dusty bowed corpse, and I hurried after him. I felt a sneaking relief that the wrong decision had been made for me. I, too, was in a fever of impatient curiosity.

THE jar stood in the center of the workshop bench in our prefabricated storeroom. Night had fallen, and the overhead lights were all on. We stood around the bench—all except Tinus, who was still up at the cavern. Louren had decided to place a twenty-four-hour armed guard over the entrance to the tunnel, and Tinus was it—until we could get others. At that moment Louren was ordering these, along with further equipment. We could hear him in the next room, shouting into the microphone, but none of us paid attention. We were staring, mesmerized, at an eighteen-inch, unglazed red pottery jar, its lid sealed with a layer of beeswax.

"I wish Louren would hurry up." Sally stirred impatiently.

Suddenly I was afraid. I didn't want to know what was in the jar. I didn't want to find it simply filled with ordinary African grain. Perhaps we would all echo Louren's cry, "Is that all?"

Finally Louren entered. "Okay, Ben. What have you got for us?"

Carefully, with a scalpel, I scraped away the layer of beeswax. The lid came off with surprising ease. All heads craned forward as I began easing the contents out of the jar. It was a cylindrical shape that inched out onto the table.

There was a running commentary from the watchers. "It smells." "It's wrapped in cloth!" "Well, woven, anyway." "This will take some explaining away as Bantu culture!"

As I laid it on the table a dream became reality. *I knew what it was.* A treasure beyond all gold and diamonds. I looked at Sally and her eyes met mine. "Oh, Ben!" She had guessed immediately. "I'm so happy for you." And I saw that she was crying.

I took up some tweezers, but my hand was so unsteady that Ral reached to take them from me. "Here, let me do it."

"No!" I snatched my hand away. I think I would have struck him had he persisted. Soon I had control of my hands again and could begin to peel off the wrappings of brittle yellow cloth. I heard Sally's little gasp, but I did not look up till it was done.

It was a scroll of leather, its outer edges eaten by decomposition, the rest of it miraculously preserved. There were columns of writing on it, and I recognized the Phoenician alphabet.

I could not read the script, but Sally had worked with Eldridge Hamilton at Oxford. "Sal, can you read it? It *is* Punic?"

"It is! It's Carthaginian!" And she began reading. "'Into Opet this day a caravan from the'"—she hesitated—"an obscure piece, then it goes on, 'In fingers of fine gold one hundred and twenty-seven pieces, of which a tenth part unto the Gry-Lion.'"

"What's a gry-lion?" Louren demanded.

"Gry is a superlative," Sally explained. "So a gry-lion is a great lion. Probably the title of the king or governor of the city."

"What the hell does it all mean?" Louren persisted.

I explained. "It means that we have found the archives of our city. We have its whole history, written by the people themselves. Lo, this is what every archaeologist prays for. We now have conclusive proof that a people who spoke the ancient Punic of Carthage, who traded gold, who called their city Opet, who—"

"And that's in only one line of writing," Sally interrupted. "There

are thousands of jars, each with its scroll. We will know the names and deeds of their kings, their battles and ceremonials, where they came from, where they went to and why."

"Good Lord!" Louren said at last. "This is the whole shebang."

IT WAS Dr. Sally Benator who managed to bring my triumph crashing around me. We were still sitting in a circle around the scroll. Sally had translated every line of exposed script, an accounting of trade into the city, when Louren's impatience again came to the surface. "Let's unroll a bit more," he suggested.

"That's a job for an expert, Lo. The leather has been rolled up for almost two thousand years. It's so dry and brittle, it will fall to pieces if it isn't done correctly."

"Yes," Sally agreed. "It'll take me weeks to do each one."

Her presumption left me flabbergasted. After three years as a third assistant to Hamilton she could read Punic about as well as a ten-year-old reads Shakespeare, and I doubted she had done much work on preservation and preparation of scrolls. Yet she was assuming that she'd be placed in sole control of one of the greatest hoards of ancient writings ever discovered.

She must have read my expression, for her alarm showed clearly. "I *am* to do the work, aren't I, Ben?"

I tried to make it easier for her. "It's an enormous and difficult job, Sal. I really think we should try to get someone like Hamilton himself—or Levy from Tel Aviv." I saw her face starting to fall to pieces. "But I'm sure we can arrange for you to become first assistant to whoever does take it on."

There was a deadly silence, during which Sally's despair turned to all-consuming rage. "Benjamin Kazin, you are a *little* man, in mind as well as body. I hate you, you *little* man!"

It is a word that eats at the fabric of my soul, and she knew it. "Make him give it to me!" she shouted to Louren. "Tell him to!"

Even in my distress I felt alarm for poor Sally. This was like prodding a black mamba with a short stick, and I couldn't believe she would presume so stupidly on Louren's friendliness. The two people I loved most were on collision course.

Louren's eyes flashed with a cold blue light and his lips drew

into grim lines. "Woman!" His voice crackled. "Hold your tongue."

Sally's bravado collapsed. The fight went out of her. She seemed to cringe beneath the lash of his voice.

"Go to your room—and stay there until you learn how to behave." Louren gave the order in the same coldly furious tone.

Sally stood up, her eyes downcast, and left the room.

I couldn't believe it: my rebellious Sally, as meek as a chastened child. Ral was writhing in embarrassment. "Bedtime, I think," he muttered. Then he was gone.

Louren broke the long silence. He stood up as he spoke, his hand dropping affectionately on my shoulder. "Sorry about that, Ben. Don't let it worry you." And he strolled out into the night.

I sat on alone with a worthless roll of leather and my breaking heart. "I hate you, you *little* man!" Her voice echoed through my thoughts, and I reached for the whisky bottle.

"BEN! Ben! Wake up!" Sally's voice, her hand shaking me gently but insistently. I opened my burning eyes. It was bright morning, and Sally was leaning over me. Her eyes were puffy and swollen as though she had been crying.

"I've come to apologize, Ben. For the stupid, hateful things I said—and my disgusting behavior." As she talked, some of the shattered pieces of my life fell back in place. "You've probably changed your mind, and I don't deserve it anyway, but I'd be honored to work as first assistant."

"You've got the job." I grinned at her. "That's a promise."

Our first task at the archives was to clean away the thick gray dust that blanketed everything. At first I was puzzled as to the source of this dust in a sealed space; then I found that the joints of the roof were not as tight as those of the walls.

The special vacuum cleaners which Louren had ordered arrived by Dakota that afternoon, along with Louren's security police, who set up a guard post at the entrance to the tunnel. Only the four of us were allowed to enter.

With the dust removed we were able to assess our discovery. There were 1142 pottery jars, 127 of them broken or cracked, probably knocked from their niches during the melée. The scrolls in

these jars were much the worse for their exposure to the air, and we sprayed them with paraffin to prevent their crumbling.

We then turned our attention to the evidence of the deadly battle that had raged through the passage. We found there were thirty-eight corpses strewn about, and their state of preservation was quite remarkable. Many of them had received terrible wounds—severed limbs, skulls split to the shoulders, heads struck clean from their trunks. Here were signs of a diabolical fury, the unleashing of an almost superhuman destructive strength. All the victims were negroid in type, and had worn headdresses of feathers, and loincloths or aprons of tanned leather, with beadwork or bone decorations. Around them were strewn crudely forged iron spearheads bound on hardwood shafts and hundreds of reed arrows which had chipped the soft sandstone walls, and it was easy to determine that they had been fired from outside the mouth of the passage by these men who lay slain.

Fifteen feet from the sealed mouth of the passage blackened walls gave evidence of a large bonfire. This fire puzzled me until Louren, pacing excitedly back and forth, reconstructed the battle.

"It was the last of our men of Opet who killed them in this place, a small party of the strongest and bravest." His voice rang with the truth of it, like a troubadour singing the old heroic legends. "The enemy sent in their champions to finish the slaughter, but our men cut them down. Next the others drew up their archers at the mouth of the passage and fired volleys of arrows. Again they went in, but the men of Opet were still waiting for them, and again they died in their dozens."

He turned and came down the passage to stand by me. "Think of it, Ben. What glory our men won on that last day."

I felt my heartbeat quicken. "What happened then?" I asked.

"They were dying, our men, weak with a dozen wounds each. They stood shoulder to shoulder, leaning wearily on their weapons, but the enemy dared not come another time. Instead they built a fire in the mouth of the passage to smoke the men of Opet out. When that did not work, they abandoned the attack and bricked up the entrance, turning it into a tomb for living and dead alike."

Louren's story made sense, in all but one respect. "If that's true,

then what happened to your band of heroes?" Sally demanded.

Louren laughed. "So *you* think of something better."

Of the heroes of this ancient drama we could find no trace, except one weapon which was obviously the author of the most horrible wounds upon the corpses. Caked with what must have been dried blood, it lay beneath the graven sun image—a battle-axe of striking beauty and utility. The blade was shaped like a double crescent moon, each side exposing seven and a half inches of razor edge, and from its extreme end protruded a twelve-inch spike. The head was exquisitely engraved with the shapes of four vultures, one on each side of the double blade, and beyond the birds a rising sun.

When first I took up that beautiful weapon from the paving where it had lain for two thousand years, my hand closed snugly around the ivory haft, the grooves in it fitting my fingers as though they had been made by them. Holding it thus I was infected by a sudden madness of which I was not even aware, until the axe was flying in a wide glittering circle around my head. The blade whickered eagerly at the kiss of moving air, and from the depths of my soul I felt a cry rising, an exultant yell which seemed the natural accompaniment to the deadly song of the axe.

With an effort I lowered the axe and stifled the cry. Louren was staring at me. "I was just testing it," I said lamely. "I'm sorry."

WE PONDERED the riddle of the missing warriors until well after midnight. The Lear was picking Louren up in the morning. Finally he walked with me back to my hut. We stopped at the door and he lit a cigar.

"That axe," he said, "it did something to you, Ben. What is it about this place? Do you feel it, this strange sense of . . . destiny?"

I nodded, and Louren was encouraged. "I'm desperate to discover the contents of the scrolls, Ben. I was reading of the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb last night. Lord Carnarvon died before he could look on the sarcophagus of the dead pharaoh. Don't waste too much time."

"You get Hamilton for me," I said. "He's a difficult old codger, but we can't work on the scrolls without him."

"I'll be in London on Friday. I'll see him myself." Louren paused. "Listen to me, Ben. If you find anything, let me know immediately. Understand? I want to be here when it happens."

"When what happens?"

"I don't know—something. There is something else here, Ben. I know it." And he walked away toward his own hut.

On the following Monday a construction crew arrived to erect a large warehouse for the scrolls, fitted with airtight doors and a powerful air-conditioning unit. It was surrounded with a high barbed-wire fence for security reasons.

On the same day my plans received a crippling blow. Louren wired: HAMILTON UNAVAILABLE. PLEASE SUGGEST ALTERNATIVE.

I was disappointed, hurt and angry. Disappointed because Hamilton was the best in the world, hurt because he obviously believed my claims were spurious, and angry because his refusal would discourage others from working with me. Hamilton had clearly been influenced by the attacks of my scientific opponents.

"He's a skinny, bald-headed, lecherous old goat!" Sally said.

"And the greatest authority on ancient writings in the world," I added bitterly. "And he didn't even give me a chance."

We sat in forlorn silence for a while. Then Sally perked up. "Let's go and fetch him!" she suggested.

"He'll refuse to see us."

"He won't refuse me," Sally said. "Remember, I used to work for him." Her words set jealousy coursing through my veins.

SEVENTY-TWO hours later I sat in the front lounge of the Bell at Hurley, watching the parking lot. It wasn't a long drive from Oxford, and Sally should have been here by now. She had phoned Hamilton from the airport and had persuaded him to meet her. "Lunch? That's wonderful, Professor. I have a rented car. Why don't I pick you up at your college?" She'd given me a thumbs-up sign. "The Bell? Of course I remember—how could I forget?"

Eventually the car drove into the lot. Sally didn't look like a girl who had sat for fourteen hours in an intercontinental jet. She slid out of the driver's seat and came toward the hotel, hanging on Hamilton's arm and laughing gaily.

Eldridge Hamilton was a tall, stoop-shouldered man in his fifties. A baggy Harris tweed suit hung like a sack on his gaunt frame. His nose was beaky, and his bald pate shone in the pale sunlight. All in all he wasn't formidable competition, but his little eyes behind their horn-rimmed glasses sparkled at Sally as she led him to my table. He was six feet from me before he saw me. He stopped dead. For a moment the whole project hung in the balance.

"Eldridge!" I leaped to my feet. "How wonderful to see you! I've ordered you a large Gilbey's gin and tonic—that *is* your poison, isn't it?" It was five years since we had last met, and my remembering his tastes mollified him slightly. He allowed me to ease him into a seat and place the drink convenient to his right hand.

While Sally and I bombarded him with our combined charm he maintained a suspicious silence. Halfway through the third gin, however, he thawed. Soon he became skittish and voluble.

"Did you read Snell's reply to your *Ophir* in the *Journal*?" he asked. Wilfred Snell was the most vociferous of my adversaries. "Jolly amusing, what?" He neighed like a randy stallion, and pawed at one of Sally's beautiful sun-browned thighs.

Fighting down the temptation to drag the man around the room by his heels, I suggested that we go in to lunch.

As we were giving the pheasant the attention it deserved, Eldridge, with characteristic tact, brought up the subject of Louren. "Met a friend of yours the other day. Big, flashy chap. Cross between a male model and a professional wrestler. Had some cock-and-bull story about scrolls you'd found in a cave." He neighed again. "Damned man had the cheek to offer me money. I know the type—not a bean to bless himself with, and talks like he's made of the stuff. Sent him packing, of course."

Sally gaped at him. "Louren Sturvesant was on *Time* magazine's list of the thirty richest men in the world," she murmured.

"Yes," I affirmed. "He's bankrolling my dig in Botswana. Two hundred thousand dollars so far, and he's set no limit."

Eldridge turned a stricken face toward me as it suddenly dawned on him that he had been within range of a patron as rare as the unicorn and had let him escape. I swear that I felt true compassion for him as I took one of the scrolls from my briefcase.

"I've an appointment with Ruben Levy in Tel Aviv tomorrow, Eldridge." I opened the protective canvas wrapping. "We have over a thousand of these, so Levy will be pretty busy for the next few years. Of course Sturvesant will make a handsome donation to their faculty of archaeology in return."

Eldridge swallowed his pheasant as if it were broken glass. He wiped his fingers and mouth with his napkin before leaning forward to examine the scroll. His lips moved silently as he read.

When he spoke, his voice quavered with excitement. "Punic in the style of the second century B.C. You see the use of ligatures to join the median M? That's definitely pre–first century B.C. Here, Sally, do you see the archaic crossing of the A?"

I interrupted this flow of technicalities with a gentle untruth. "Levy is very excited." Levy didn't know the scrolls existed.

"Levy?" Eldridge snorted. "Take Levy outside Hebrew and Egyptian and he's a babe in the woods!" He had hold of my wrist. "Ben, I insist, I absolutely insist on doing this work!"

ELDRIDGE followed us out a week after our return to the City of the Moon, and we met him at the airstrip. His luggage consisted of a single small valise containing personal effects, and a dozen large cases filled with chemicals and equipment.

Within hours of his arrival he was working like a medieval chemist, steaming and soaking and spraying and painting. For each of the scrolls his treatment varied, depending on the state of preservation, the quality of the leather, and so on. Sally reported that his absorption in the task had reduced his animal instincts to a level where he made only occasional and half-hearted clutches at the protruding parts of her anatomy.

One after the other the scrolls proved to be either books of accounts on the city's trade or proclamations made by the hereditary king, the Gry-Lion, and a council of nine noble families. The authors were nameless clerks, and their outlook echoed the way of life we had reconstructed from our other finds; the men of Opet were traders and warriors, more concerned with wealth and the acquisition of power than with the arts and the niceties of living.

"And we white Africans are just like them," Sally said during

one of our nightly talk sessions. "When there's gold in them thar hills who gives a hoot about painting pictures?"

The scrolls referred to gold brought from places called Zimbao and Punt, which we identified as territories in Rhodesia, ivory from the forests along a great river, clearly the Zambezi, and copper from the hills of Tuya, the rich mining area above present-day Sinoia. There were also references to salt and fish from lakes which had since disappeared, and to corn, hides, dried meat, sun stones —and slaves, thousands of tiny yellow-skinned Yuye who we guessed were the ancestors of today's Bushmen.

The scrolls were dated from a point in time which we suspected must be the founding of the city. Once the nature of the scrolls was established I suggested to Eldridge that rather than work systematically through, we sample them and try to understand the overall history of our city. He fell in with my wishes.

A picture emerged of the widespread colonization of central and southern Africa by a warlike and energetic people, based on the city of Opet. The decrees of the Gry-Lion and the oligarchy of noble families ranged from measures for dredging the channels of the city's shrinking lake to the choice of messengers to be sent to Baal and Astarte. Here Astarte seemed to have taken precedence over the more usual Carthaginian form, Tanith. Messengers, we suspected, were human sacrifices.

As we moved forward in time we learned how the Gry-Lion's searches for slave labor became desperate. The slaving expeditions were sent farther and farther afield, as the Yuye were hunted down. Then suddenly the Gry-Lion was delighted by the return of a northerly expedition with five hundred "savage Nubians, both tall and strong," and the leader of the expedition was rewarded with ten fingers of gold. This delight faded slowly over the following years as a mass of black humanity built up north of the great river. Evidently the vast Bantu migrations had begun. Now the concern of the Gry-Lion was to dam the southward flood, and his legions constantly patrolled the northern border.

How we longed to find the writings of a Pliny or a Livy to give flesh to these meticulous records of acquired wealth. Each fact only presented us with a hundred unanswered questions. Where

did they come from, these men of Opet, and when? Where did they go to, and why? What became of the treasure they had built up? Was it still here, in some secret storehouse in the cliffs?

As an exercise I made an estimate of the extent of this treasure. Assuming that a "finger" of gold was one of the rods of the precious metal we had discovered among the foundations of the city, I listed the total inflow of gold from the mines recorded in a given twenty years. The total yield could not have been less than four thousand tons—of which a tenth part had always gone to the Gry-Lion. Assuming that half of the Gry-Lion's four hundred tons had been spent by the king, this still left the staggering figure of two hundred tons of gold, worth almost $200,000,000.

When I showed my calculations to Louren on his next visit to the site, I saw the gold-greed glitter in his eyes. "You know, Ben, you and Ral should spend more time exploring the area along the cliffs, and less time in those passages. If you just happened to stumble on the royal treasury, I wouldn't hate you for it. After all, that would be a nice piece of petty cash."

Eldridge and Sally had enough material to keep them busy for two or three months, so after we had rephotographed every inch of the cavern—this time with infrared—I decided to follow Louren's suggestion.

It was now November, which we call the suicide month in Africa. The sun was a hammer, and the earth its anvil. Despite the terrible heat, we combed a three-hundred-foot section of red rock each day, searching by touch as well as with our eyes. November passed and we worked on without results. In contrast, Eldridge and Sally continued to reap a rich harvest from the scrolls.

Christmas came and we sat outdoors exchanging gifts under a moon as big as a silver gong. I sang them "White Christmas" in the style of Bing Crosby, then Eldridge and I did "Jingle Bells." Eldridge had forgotten the words, except for the jingling part. Our Eldridge was a great little jingler, especially after several gins.

EARLY in the new year we had what amounted to a royal visit. Hilary Sturvesant had at last prevailed upon Louren to bring her to see the site. They brought Bobby with them, and I was beside

myself with excitement at the prospect of having all my favorite women there at the City of the Moon.

They arrived in time for the lunch of cold meats and salads which I had personally prepared. Immediately the visit began to sour. Sally was not at the meal. She sent a message that she had a headache and was going to lie down. Later I saw her sneaking off with swimming things toward the pool. Inevitably Eldridge and Louren were still hostile to each other: I recalled Eldridge's boast that at their first meeting he had sent Louren packing.

As if this were not enough, it was also obvious that Hilary and Louren were engaged in a domestic dispute. All communication between them was conducted through Bobby.

Immediately after the meal Eldridge retreated to his scrolls, and Ral muttered excuses and fled. Louren took his shotgun and drove away in the Land-Rover, leaving Hilary and Bobby to me. I took them through the site museum.

There Hilary was fascinated and soon forgot her unhappiness. She and I talked together like the old and dear friends we were. At dusk, when we were walking back toward the visitors' hut, she said suddenly, "Do you think he's found another woman, Ben?"

I was startled. "What on earth makes you think that, Hil?"

"Nothing. It's just that—" She stopped and sighed.

"Where would he find more than he has now?" I asked.

She took my hand. "Dear Ben. What would we do without you?"

Later, with dread in my heart, I went across to the common room, presumably for a repeat of the midday performance. At the threshold I blinked with surprise. Louren, Eldridge and the others were in a friendly and animated huddle discussing the scrolls. I made my way with relief toward the makeshift bar.

"One for me too, Ben." Sally came across to me. I could see no evidence of her headache. She had piled her hair up on her head, and the silk dress she wore was draped to expose her strong brown back and shoulders. I had seldom seen her look so lovely.

"Professor Hamilton has done a remarkable job here, Ben," Louren greeted me. "I congratulate you on your choice of a colleague. You know, we can't keep this secret much longer. Have you had any thoughts on an announcement of some kind?"

"Well, as a matter of fact—" I hesitated. "I was thinking of something on a rather grand scale. I thought we could have the Royal Geographical Society convene a special symposium on African prehistory. Eldridge is on the council, I'm sure he could arrange it."

We looked at him, and he nodded enthusiastically.

"Then," I continued, "possibly Sturvesant International could play host to the delegates, fly them to London and pay their expenses to make sure they all attend."

Louren laughed delightedly. "I see your plan exactly, Ben. You're going to get all your critics together and then, in the jargon, you're going to murder da bums. That's right, isn't it?"

I grinned. "I guess that's about it, Lo."

"I love it." Sally clapped her hands with delight.

"We'll do this in style," Louren promised, and turned to Eldridge. "How long would it take to arrange?"

"Well, it would have to go before the council for approval. I think we could fix it for early April."

"April the first," I suggested.

"Lovely." Louren laughed.

"We must have Wilfred Snell," Sally pleaded.

"He's top of the list," I assured her.

We were still scheming when we sat down to the fiery curry of wild pheasant that I had hoped would make the sultry night air seem cool by comparison. There was cold beer to go with it, and the meal developed into a festive occasion. Then Sally turned suddenly to Hilary, who had been sitting quietly beside me. "You must find the heat and the primitive conditions here most trying, Mrs. Sturvesant. Not the weather for tennis, is it?"

The way she said it made tennis seem the pastime of an ineffectual social butterfly. I was surprised at Sally. Hilary, however, was ready for her. "I'm sure it can be most unhealthy, Dr. Benator, especially after any length of time. The sun can play such havoc with one's skin. And you still look peaky from your headache. I do hope you are feeling better now."

Sally changed her attack. She turned all her attention to Louren, laughing at his every word and not taking her eyes off him.

Hilary was helpless against these tactics. Finally she played her

trump. "Louren, darling, it's been such a busy day. Won't you take me to bed now, please?"

She swept off on Louren's arm, and I had to admit that Sally had received the treatment she deserved. I think I began to know then what was happening, but I did not want to admit it to myself.

AT BREAKFAST Louren announced that the family would return at once to Johannesburg, rather than stay another day as planned. When I asked him later for a reason he shrugged with exasperation. "Women! You're lucky you never married, Ben."

Meanwhile, he had received a radio report about the discovery, in Rhodesia, of an ancient goldworking site. "I'm stealing a couple more days off, Ben," he said. "Just can't resist it. You come along, okay?"

On our way northward toward the Zambezi he suddenly glanced at his watch, then switched on the Land-Rover's radio. "Just the news. Can't lose touch."

We listened to the strivings of a world gone mad. In this remote and tranquil place the affairs of men seemed unimportant. "Switch it off, Lo," I said. "Who needs it?"

He reached for the knob, then checked his hand. "Lusaka Radio reports that the leader of the terrorist gang which yesterday killed a policeman in the Wankie district of Rhodesia and wounded two others is the 'Colonel' Timothy Makeba who several months ago made world headlines in a dramatic hijacking incident. A reward of ten thousand Rhodesian dollars has been offered for—"

With a savage gesture Louren switched off the set. "He's only a hundred miles north of here. I'd give anything to get a chance at that one."

In the middle of the next morning, as we continued to pick our way northeast, we saw vultures. It was probably only a lion kill, but we kept our eyes peeled all the same, until we came to a Bushmen's encampment near a water hole. The Bushmen had erected five rude shelters thatched with leaves and grass. Of the tiny, timid people themselves there was no sign. Vultures sat in the treetops close by and, as we approached, twenty or thirty of them flapped into the air. We stopped the Land-Rover. All around were

boot marks and spilled cartridge cases, shoddily manufactured and stamped with Chinese characters.

Inside the huts we found Bushman women and girls raped and bayoneted, their menfolk shot down with bursts of automatic fire. For the Bantu, Bushman women are particular objects of lust. There were flies everywhere, big green metallic flies that came to settle on my eyes and lips. I struck them away angrily.

"Oh God," I said. "Why do they do it?"

"It's their style," Louren answered. "Frelimo, Mau Mau—all of them hit their own people hardest."

"But why?" I repeated.

"They've got guns. They want to use them. This is easier than going for white ranchers or police posts."

I walked back to our vehicle and leaned against the door and was sick. Louren followed me. "There must have been a lot of them—quite a big party," he said. "I think we should turn back."

I agreed. The goldworkings were no longer important in the face of this horror. We turned the Land-Rover back southward.

THE journey developed into a nightmare. The roaring of our gears as we negotiated the rough ground broadcast our progress far ahead. Every mile there was a location ideal for an ambush. Louren drove in grim silence, an unlit cigar stub in the corner of his mouth. Our eyes moved from side to side, searching.

It seemed hours later that we reached a pool in a dry watercourse, where we stopped while I took a water container down to the pool to refill it. Louren stood by the Land-Rover with his rifle, never taking his eyes off the surrounding bush.

A fleck of white at the water's edge caught my eye. I was about to dismiss it as bird droppings when I noticed something else. Casually I strolled along the pool until the white object was at my feet. Then I glanced down, and my breath jammed in my throat.

It was a piece of domestic soap, with a wet lacework of bubbles still frothing around it. There were damp marks on the rocks that the sun had not yet dried, and in the mud at the water's edge was a strange, half-human print, like that of a giant bird.

I walked back to Louren. "Lo," I said softly. "Don't do anything

suddenly. Behave as naturally as you can. Mageba and a few of his gang are close by, perhaps watching us."

He lit a fresh cigar and puffed a few times. "Where?" he asked.

"I don't know. They were bathing when they heard us coming." I added, "I feel like one of those little mechanical ducks in a shooting gallery." I tried a smile. It hung crookedly on my face.

In that instant they opened up on us, tearing the air around me with gunfire. They were lining the bank of the dry watercourse, hidden in the reeds and scrub. I saw the muzzle flashes, glinting like swords.

In one swift movement I hefted an automatic rifle we had brought out of the Land-Rover and tucked a couple of spare magazines into my belt. Then, holding the gun on my hip, I went after them, running toward the riverbed, straight at the center of their line. The spent cartridge cases spewed from the breech. I changed magazines, saw the lip of the bank dissolve in spurting clouds of dust as I traversed it, saw one of them flung backward.

"You crazy bastard!" I heard Louren yelling somewhere but I did not care. They were running panicky for the far side of the dry bed and I turned the gun on them. It went dead in my hands, and I stood unarmed and unafraid.

From the far bank Timothy Mageba turned back toward me. He had a pistol in his right fist, and he aimed it at me. I felt the passage of the bullet close beside my head. I saw him glaring at me—those terrible smoky eyes. Then suddenly Louren was beside me, snapping a shot at the great cannonball head. I saw Makeba wince and stagger slightly, then he was gone into the thick scrub.

Louren stared at me in disbelief. "They didn't touch you," he said with wonder. "You silly fool. Not a single bullet—my God, Ben, you frightened the hell out of me."

He put his arm around my shoulder and led me to the Land-Rover. "We must hurry," he said. "They're sure to be back."

I checked the vehicle: it seemed all right, except for two shot tires. As Louren climbed wearily into the driver's seat after we had changed the tires, the sniping began. He pressed the starter; it whirred dismally, on and on. I closed my eyes and prayed.

A stray bullet smashed the windshield. The engine shuddered,

and fired once. Then, abruptly, it roared into life. Louren smashed through a belt of scrub thorn, then angled back to pick up the trail. The firing behind died away, and suddenly I was shaking like a man in a high fever.

All that night we crawled southward, jolting and bumping over the rough ground, often losing the track and having to search for it, shivering in the cold of an African night when the wind blew through the shattered windshield.

After we arrived back at the City of the Moon, Louren had to spend more than an hour on the radio to the police in Bulawayo. As I listened to him I wondered why Makeba, why anybody, should want to destroy our society. And if they succeeded, what would they replace it with? Here, it occurred to me, this City of the Moon had once housed a great civilization. Now all that remained of it were a few poor relics. This continent had nourished it, then devoured it utterly.

Life at the site returned to its normal satisfying routine. Ral threw himself with renewed energy into our search of the cliffs, but I spent little time with him now. Instead I began to prepare my address for the Royal Geographical Society. This should have been a labor of love and excitement, but I found myself floundering, long-winded and inconclusive. I would rip the sheets from my typewriter, ball them, and hurl them at the wall. It frightened me that unruly emotions should intrude on the marshaling of my thoughts. Reaction from our journey was part of it. And Sally's behavior was worrying me. No doubt there was also fear of the confrontation with my scholarly enemies. I do not know how long my despondency might have lasted, had it not been for the discovery that unlocked so many of our mysteries.

Eldridge's team had been countering my apathy by an accelerated advance through the scrolls. At breakfast one day he asked me to resume the work of removing jars from the archives, as he was ready to tackle the rest of them. I welcomed the excuse not to have to face the accusing stare of my blank paper, and Ral was pleased to have a change from his search of the cliffs. So that morning we went back to the cool gloom of the cavern.

Toward the end of the day Ral lifted a jar down from its slab and suddenly exclaimed, "Hello! What's this?" Behind where the jar had been, the wall opened into a square stone cupboard.

I had a strange feeling of preknowledge as I stared at the row of smaller, squatter jars that had been hidden away in this recess. My lethargy fell away. There were five jars, each with a loop of plaited gold wire linking lid and body, and a clay seal bearing the imprinted figure of a crouching vulture, the classical sunbird of the Zimbabwe culture.

I reached in and attempted to lift the first jar out. It stayed immovable on its slab. "It's stuck," I said. The rest seemed as solidly anchored. I returned to the first jar and tried with all my strength to twist it loose. The muscles knotted in my forearms before the jar moved toward me an inch. I realized that it was held down only by its immense weight. It was fifty times heavier than jars twice its size.

Between us Ral and I shifted it to the edge of the shelf and then down into the fiber-glass cradle we had designed for transporting the jars. Then we each took a handle and carried it down to the repository.

The others hardly glanced up from their work. I winked at Ral, and quietly we lifted the jar onto the bench. "Eldridge," I said casually, "would you mind having a look at this one?"

"One moment." Ral and I waited patiently until at last he laid his magnifying glass aside and looked up. He reacted immediately, coming quickly to the bench. "Where did you find it? How many are there?"

His tone alerted the others and they almost ran to join us. "Open it," Sally said.

"Well, Professor Hamilton, what are we waiting for?" I asked.

"What indeed?" At once the two of us went to work on the seal. The lid lifted easily, and inside was the usual linen-wrapped cylinder. I tilted the jar carefully on its side and withdrew the weighty roll. The wrapping folded off in one piece.

Nobody spoke as we stared at the exposed cylinder. It was another scroll. But this one was a rolled sheet of pure gold. It was eighteen inches wide and a fraction over twenty-eight feet long.

There were five of them, and each weighed 1954 fine ounces—but the weight of their gold had nothing to do with their true value.

The beautifully yellow metal unrolled readily. The characters had been cut into it with exquisite skill, but the reflected light from its surface dazzled the eye. We watched with fascination as Eldridge spread lampblack across the blinding surface and then carefully wiped off the excess. Each character stood out now, etched in black against the golden background.

He adjusted his spectacles and began to read. It was immediately clear that we had chosen the first scroll in a series, and that Eldridge was reading a preface or author's note.

> "Go thou to my store and take thence five hundred fingers of the finest gold of Opet. Make from this a scroll that will not corrupt, that these songs may live forever, that the glory of our nation may live forever in the words of our beloved Sunbird, Huy, son of Amon, high priest of Baal, axeman of all the gods. Let men read his words and rejoice as I have rejoiced, let men hear his songs and weep as I have wept, let his laughter echo down the years and his wisdom live forever.
>
> "Thus spoke Lannon Hycanus, forty-seventh Gry-Lion of Opet, king of Punt and the four kingdoms."

Eldridge stopped reading, and looked about the circle of our intent faces. We were all silent. This was no account book: this was the very breath, the essence of a people and a land. "Go on," I said. "Go on."

Eldridge began to read again. The hours sped by as we listened to the poems of Huy Ben-Amon, son of Amon, sung again after two thousand years. This, then, was Opet's true historian, her philosopher, and I felt with him a curious kinship. I understood his pride and petty conceits, admired his bold vision and was held captive by the story web he wove about me.

He began with Carthage surrounded by the Roman legions of Scipio Aemilianus. He told us how Hasdrubal sent a swift ship flying for help across the Mediterranean to where Hamilcar, the last scion of the Barcas, a family long since fallen from power and politics, lay with a great Carthaginian war fleet off Hippo on the

north African coast. How the besieged leader called for succor, and how storm and adverse winds denied it to him.

"That gives us our first date," I said. "The Third Punic War and the final destruction of Carthage—146 B.C."

"I think we'll find it's also the starting date for the Opet calendar," Eldridge added.

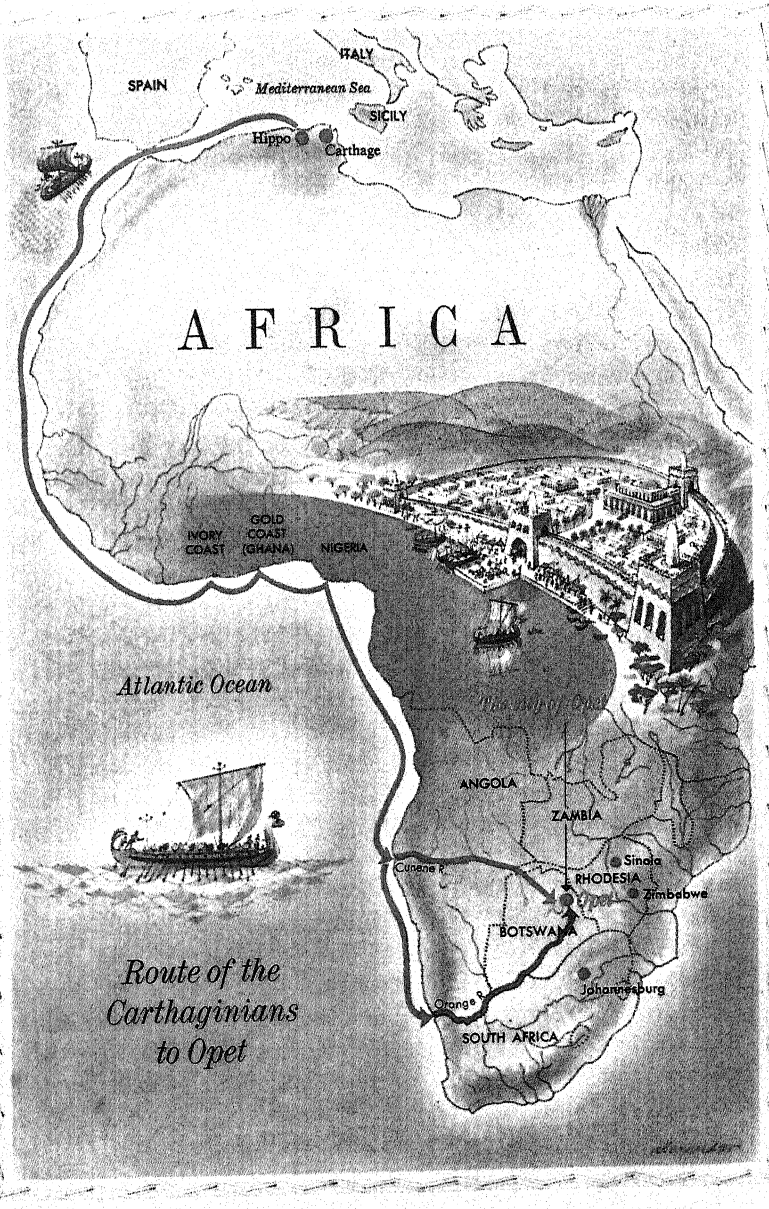
"Go on," Sally said. "Please go on."

Two biremes escaped the rape of Carthage and fled with the great winds to where Barca Hamilcar still lay fretting at Hippo. When told the news, he mourned Carthage for twenty days and twenty nights. Then he sent for his nine sea captains. None of them could see where there might be any sanctuary from Roman pursuit—until Habbakuk Lal, the master navigator, reminded them of the voyage that Hanno had made three hundred years before. He had sailed beyond the gates of Hercules to a mighty lake where the seasons were reversed, gold grew like flowers upon the rocks, and elephants lived in great herds upon the plains.

So Barca Hamilcar led his fleet westward in the path of Hanno, into an uncharted sea. Two years after setting out they sailed into the mouth of a wide, placid river and journeyed up it for sixteen days, dragging their ships through the shallows, until finally they reached the mighty lake of which Hanno had spoken. They landed upon the farthest shore under a tall red cliff, and there Barca Hamilcar died of the shaking fever he had carried with him from the north. His infant son Lannon Hamilcar was chosen as the new king and the nine admirals became his councillors. They named their new land Opet, after the legendary land of gold, and began to build their first city.

"My God, it's four o'clock!" Ral finally broke the spell that had held us for most of the night, and I realized just how tired I was—emotionally and physically exhausted, but well content. Now I could go to London in triumph. I had it all.

How swiftly the days passed now. My typewriter clattered steadily from before sunrise until noon each day. I spent the afternoons and evenings in the repository, listening to the songs of Huy. There was no chance that the translation of the golden scrolls


ITALY
SPAIN
Mediterranean Sea
SICILY
Hippo
Carthage
AFRICA
GOLD COAST (GHANA)
IVORY COAST
NIGERIA
Atlantic Ocean
ANGOLA
ZAMBIA
Sinoia
Cunene R.
RHODESIA
Zimbabwe
Opet
BOTSWANA
Johannesburg
Orange R.
SOUTH AFRICA
Route of the Carthaginians to Opet

could be completed by April 1, nor could the meeting be postponed, but I raced to marshal as much of the material as I could.

All of us became deeply involved in Huy's story. The songs were a compulsive, living cavalcade. And how often I found Africa's recent history but an echo of the adventures of Opet.

For the first five years the settlement had prospered. The men of Opet fell into a trading relationship with the Yuye, the yellow-skinned people who inhabited the land, and made a treaty with their king. Habbakuk Lal set forth with five swift ships and pioneered a trade route along which the treasures of southern Africa would pour into the known world—but, wary of Rome's vengeful eye, he covered his tracks like the crafty old sea fox he was.

The colony exploded into growth. There was war with the Yuye. King Yuye died in the flames of his city and his people were taken into slavery. This is the law of Africa, a land that favors the strong, where the lion alone walks proud.

Centuries passed. Kings took the throne and then passed from it. A new breed of man arose from the mixed blood of Opet and Yuye. He was a citizen, but still only the sons of the nine ancient noble families might govern. As an offshoot of this nobility a clan of warrior priests arose, sons of Amon. It amused me, Benjamin Kazin, that the clan had its origin in a man from the old kingdom —that is, the kingdom of Tyre and Sidon on the borders of ancient Canaan. Those priests probably sprang from Semitic stock.

From the golden books we had an occasional exciting flash of physical contact with the past. Huy described the laying out of the city's walls, and the towers of Baal. They tallied exactly with the foundations we had exposed. Huy gave the dimensions of the walls: thirty-five feet high and fifteen thick. Such walls—how had they so completely disappeared?

From Huy's descriptions we could recognize most of the animals and birds of Punt and the four kingdoms. The sacred sunbird, who carried offerings of meat to Baal, was obviously the vulture. Thus we saw the significance of the birds on the seals of the golden scrolls. The vulture had been taken as the emblem of the warrior priests—Huy had placed his personal seal on these jars.

There were other animals described by the poet which could

only be now-extinct species. Chief of these was the gry-lion, from which the king took his title. Laws were passed to protect this large predator because of the role it played in the ritual of proving a new king before coronation, a ceremony which Huy referred to as "taking the gry-lion."

In the Opet year of 450 the nation was at the zenith of her wealth and power. But she had outgrown herself. Her boundaries were extended, her slave population hardly sufficient to support her enterprises.

At this point, at the end of Huy Ben-Amon's second golden book, we had reluctantly to interrupt our reading. It was the end of March, and the jet was waiting to take us to catch the international flight from Luanda. Leaving Ral to supervise the site, Eldridge, Sally and I flew away.

In London Sally and I had one free day before work began, one precious day to ourselves, and as usual I tried to do it all. By the time we returned to the Dorchester Hotel it was after midnight, but Sally was still wrought up with the impact of London.

"I'm too excited to sleep yet, Ben. What shall we do?"

"Well, I've a bottle of champagne up in my suite."

She looked at me with an amused twinkle in her eyes. "Ben Kazin, my favorite boy scout. Always prepared."

It was Krug, very pale and dry. When the bottle was half finished we made love for the first time in six months. Afterward Sally refilled our empty glasses with the brimming pale wine and stood over me. "I don't know why I did that," she said.

"Are you sorry?" I asked, taking the glass she gave me.

"No, Ben. I've never regretted anything between us. I only wish—" But instead of saying what she wished she sipped at her glass and sat down beside me on the bed.

"You know that I love you," I said. "I'll always love you."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what."

"I believe you, Ben." She looked at me with an expression I could not fathom. "Just be patient, Ben. Please be patient."

"Sally—" I began, but she silenced my lips with hers.

AT NINE THE NEXT MORNING I put Sally into a taxi headed for a hairdresser in Bond Street. I had to wait in the hotel for the arrival of the Sturvesants.

When they came I met them in the foyer. Hilary was in a soft wrap of honey mink, and over her towered Louren, his mane bleached to white gold and his face burned dark nut-brown.

"Ben, old partner!" He grabbed me around the shoulders. "Thank God you're here. Will you look after Hil for me? I've got a few things to clear up, then I'll see you back here."

I stood opposite Hilary in the elevator, delighted to see how radiant she looked. She had that bright look of happiness which cosmetics can never fake.

"We've had ten days in the Seychelle Islands, Ben. It's been wonderful." She went all misty at the memory. "Our anniversary—look!" And she held up her left hand to show a solitaire diamond certainly not a shade less than twenty-five carats.

"It's beautiful, Hilary." Then, still not admitting to myself the reason, I thought, The deeper the guilt, the bigger the gift.

When we reached the Oliver Messel suite Louren had booked, Hilary gasped at the baroque superabundance. "It just can't be true, Ben!"

"Don't laugh," I warned her. "It's costing you a pretty penny."

She flopped down into one of the enormous armchairs. "You can get me a drink, Ben, my love. I need it."

While I poured I asked, unnecessarily, "Your problems were of a temporary nature then, Hil?"

"I've forgotten I ever had any. He's better than he ever was."

When Louren came back I saw what she meant. He was in high humor and restless with energy. "Okay, Ben. Show it to me."

As soon as I had poured him a Scotch we plunged into Eldridge's translation of the golden scrolls. Louren picked on the first line. "Go thou to my store and take thence five hundred fingers of the finest gold—" He repeated the line, then looked up at me. "That's right from the old boy's mouth, Ben. 'My store.' That clod Hamilton mistranslated it. It should read 'treasury.'"

"Suddenly your Punic's pretty hot, Lo."

"Well, for cat's sake, Ben, when did you ever send down to a

store for your gold?" He paused, tasting the whisky. "Let's accept that there was a violent and sudden end to our city. Yet the archives are almost untouched. Isn't there a good chance that the treasury was untouched also? We've just got to find it."

"Great!" I grinned sarcastically. "Look, I've been searching for it these last six months."

He did not answer my grin. "It's probably within the cavern area," he said seriously.

"Hell, Lo. I've been over every inch of it fifty times."

"The hundredth time you'll realize how blind you've been."

"Okay. I'll go on searching, just as long as you keep paying."

We parted in midafternoon, Louren being borne away on a flood of BYM to where a black Rolls waited in front of the hotel, and I slipping out the side entrance to hail my own taxi.

Eldridge was waiting at the Royal Geographical Society, having driven up from Oxford. We spent the afternoon with the council, discussing the opening of the symposium, which was set for two thirty next day, following a lunch at the Dorchester.

"His Grace will make the opening address," one of the council explained. "We've asked him to keep it to forty-five minutes, and please to avoid references to orchid growing or steeplechasing. . . ."

Then I would read my paper. It would be a follow-up of the one I had read six years earlier, "The Mediterranean influence on central and southern Africa of the pre-Christian era," the paper that had afforded Snell and his pack so much sport. Four hours were set aside for me, and Eldridge would read his paper the following morning. The title he had chosen, "Certain ancient writings and symbols of southwestern African origin," was purposely vague, so as not to telegraph my punch.

After leaving the RGS, Eldridge gave me a bad attack of the shakes by driving me back to the Dorchester through London's rush-hour traffic while I hung on the door handle ready to bail out.

I led him into the cocktail bar, shot a pair of double gins into him, and left him. I had plans for the evening and it was already past six. Sally came out of the elevator as I approached. The hairdresser had let her hair lie, still loose and cloudy. She had on a long green dress that picked up the green of her eyes.

"Ben!" She came to me quickly. "I left a note for you. About this evening. I'm terribly afraid I won't be able to make it."

"That's all right, Sal," I told her, hiding my disappointment.

"It's some old friends. They've come all the way from Brighton."

I went up to Louren's suite and hung around waiting for him, chatting with Hilary. At seven thirty he phoned, and Hilary put me on after she had spoken to him. "I was hoping we could have dinner, Ben, but I'm screwed up here for heaven knows how long. Redrafting an entire contract. Why don't you take Hilary?"

But she pleaded exhaustion, and wanted to have an early night. So I ate alone and spent my evening making plans for the morrow.

LOUREN woke me at eight in the morning, bellowing into the phone. "It's the big day, Ben. Come to breakfast in our suite."

Bolstered by a huge platter of steak and bacon, kidneys and eggs, I was carried through the morning on a wave of excitement. By the time we went down to meet our guests I felt like a lion. Louren and I entered the private lounge together, and the buzz of conversation dwindled. Only one voice continued, braying across the room. Wilfred Snell, towering above his circle, was like a badly executed monument to himself. His face was white and soft-looking, as if a plastic skin had been filled with dirty milk.

I approached him obliquely, stopping to greet friends, to chat with colleagues. He saw my approach, but ignored it. Even when the circle about him opened, giving me access to the presence, his gaze still passed several feet above my head. I waited patiently, wearing the self-effacing smile I use at times like this.

At last he glanced down, stopped in mid-sentence, and to his delight and surprise, discovered his old colleague, Dr. Benjamin Kazin. "Benjamin, my dear fellow! How very good to see you."

Then he did a rash thing. He held out his hand, and I had him. "Wilfred, my dear, dear chap. Delighted you could come."

It was only when my fingers had cut in for an inch or two that I could actually feel the bones. He began to do a little jig, skipping from foot to foot. "We must make time for a little private chat," I said. Then, suddenly disgusted with my brutality, I let him go. "Come," I told him gently, "let me get you a drink."

Wilfred, however, is nothing if not resilient. At one stage during lunch I noticed him reading my *Ophir* aloud to the general merriment of his companions.

I was relieved when at last Louren glanced at his watch and nodded to the BYM who was in charge of the arrangements. Immediately this gentleman was on his feet, shepherding the party out to a cavalcade of cars.

We were set down at the door of the society. Up in the main assembly room I joined the committee on the platform, while the hall filled solidly. Wilfred sat front and center, surrounded by his sycophants.

They led in His Grace, smelling of cigars and good port, pointed him at the audience like a howitzer, and let him go. In forty-five minutes he had covered orchids and the steeplechase season. The chairman began tugging discreetly at his coattails, but it was another twenty minutes before I had my chance.

"Six years ago I had the honor of addressing this society. My subject then was the same as it is today. But I come before you now armed with further evidence."

Every few minutes Snell would heave himself around in his seat and whisper loudly to his neighbor. I ignored the distraction and plowed through my introduction, a résumé of all the previously known evidence, which I purposely made dull, letting Snell and his party believe that I had nothing substantially new to support my views.

"Then, in March of last year I was shown a photograph by Mr. Louren Sturvesant." Now I let a little electricity into my tone. Suddenly I was telling them a detective story. Snell's pompous asides diminished. I had the audience by the throat.

At the appropriate moment the lights went down and the first picture was projected on a screen behind me. It was the white king. The audience sat in rapt silence as other images followed. I carried the story to the point before we discovered the walled-up tunnel beyond the white king, and then signaled for the lights.

The audience stirred back to the present. Even Snell looked shaken, but I had to accord him grudging admiration—the man was game to the core. He roused himself. "Typical Bantu stone-

work of the thirteenth century A.D.," he told his neighbor in a penetrating whisper. "There's no new evidence here."

I addressed him directly. "As Professor Snell has just remarked, none of this was new evidence. So I looked deeper."

Then, like my namesake, like Huy—the Sunbird, axeman of all the gods—I hacked into him, cutting him to pieces with my account of the scrolls, the vulture axe and the five golden books. As I spoke, one of the attendants wheeled in a handcart covered with a green velvet cloth. At my signal he drew aside the cloth, and there lay the great, gleaming battle-axe and one of the scrolls. Then I read the opening words of the first golden book of Huy: "'Let men read his words and rejoice as I have rejoiced, let men hear his songs and weep as I have wept.'"

Then I ended. "My time is finished, but not the story. Tomorrow morning Professor Hamilton will read his paper on the scrolls. Your Grace, Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you."

The silence was complete, nobody moved or spoke for a full ten seconds. Then they were on their feet, applauding wildly. It was the first time since the founding of the society that a paper had been applauded as if it were a stage performance. They crowded around me to shake my hand, and I saw Snell lumber alone toward the door. Suddenly I felt sorry for him. Where before he had been my implacable enemy, now he was just a rather ridiculous figure. I wanted to call out to him, but there was nothing to say.

THE following morning every national newspaper ran the story. Louren had sent out for them all, and we sat in a sea of newsprint as we ate another of those gargantuan breakfasts. I was feeling touched by his pride in my achievements when suddenly he looked up from a left-wing tabloid, scowling furiously.

"What's the matter, Lo?"

"Here!" He almost flung the sheet at me. "Read it for yourself while I finish dressing." He slammed away into the bedroom.

I found the item at once, a full page of photographs. Black men with guns and tanks. Black men marching, rank on rank. And in the center a picture of a tall man, with a bald cannonball head

that shone in the African sunlight. The caption was in bold lettering: "The Black Crusader. Major General Timothy Mageba, the newly appointed commander of the People's Liberation Army."

I felt dread as I looked at the brooding hatred in that face, the power and purpose in those broad shoulders. Somehow he detracted from my own triumph. What had happened two thousand years ago seemed of lessened importance when I looked at this man. Yet it came to me then that Africa had bred many such dark destroyers. Timothy Mageba was only the latest in a long line.

Louren came out of the bedroom, and with him Hilary. She kissed me and congratulated me again. I dropped the sheet of newspaper from my hand, but not from my mind.

"I'm sorry I can't hear Eldridge this morning, Ben," Louren said as the three of us went down in the elevator. "I can't get out of this meeting. Give Hil a good lunch, will you?"

Eldridge, in his tweeds, certainly didn't steal my glory. He mumbled on about hangs and abridgements, occasionally letting fly with that laugh of his, which woke the sleepers. After two and a half hours of this Sally slipped me a note. "Can't take any more. Going shopping." I smiled as I watched her slide out.

An hour later Eldridge ground to a halt and beamed at his depleted audience. "Well," he said, "I think that covers about everything." And there followed a relieved scramble for the doors.

Eldridge, Hilary and I were in a taxi, about to head for the Trattoria Terrazza, when Hilary gave a little cry. "My ring!"

I stared at the naked finger. "When did you last have it?"

After a second a look of relief replaced her worried frown. "Oh, I remember! I was doing my nails in our sitting room. I put it in the cigarette box beside the tapestry chair."

"Eldridge, will you please take Hilary on to the restaurant? I'll find another cab and dash back to the hotel."

Hilary dug in her handbag and came out with a key. "Ben, you are a sweetheart. I'm sorry about this."

Ten minutes later I let myself into the Oliver Messel suite with Hilary's key and hurried down the passage past the bedrooms. With a grunt of relief I found the ring, tied it into the corner of my handkerchief and started back down the passage.

From behind the door to the master bedroom came a woman's voice, husky with emotion. And a man's voice blending with it. As I froze, the voices washed and swirled and broke together in the high surf of passion. I broke away, moved to the front door like a sleepwalker, closed it silently behind me.

I SAT through a lunch I do not remember eating, through conversations I do not remember hearing. All I could hear were those voices at the Dorchester, Sally's and Louren's. Although on my return to the RGS I sat in my seat in the front row, I remember only vaguely the concluding papers and ceremonial there. I sat and stared at a crack in the floor, my mind casting back to the City of the Moon. I remembered the night when Louren came back into the tent as dawn was flushing the sky. I remembered my visit to the cavern, when Louren sent me away. I remembered Sally's friends from Brighton, her attacks on Hilary, her moods and silences—and I marveled at my own blindness.

At the sound of my name I struggled to rouse myself. It was the president of the society, speaking and smiling down at me. ". . . awarded the society's Founder's and Patron's Medal." Around me heads were craning, smiling also, friendly, kind faces. Gentle but insistent hands were pushing me toward the stage.

"Speech!" they called, laughing, applauding.

I stood before them. I felt fuzzy and stupid, and the room blurred. "Your Grace," I began, "I am honored . . ." I groped for words, looking desperately about the hall, seeking inspiration.

Sally Benator was standing by the side entrance. I did not know how long she had been there. She was smiling, white teeth in her sun-brown and lovely face, her cheeks aflame, her eyes sparkling.

I stared at her. "I am grateful . . ." I mumbled. She nodded and smiled encouragement at me—and my heart broke. It was a physical thing, a strange pain so intense that I caught my breath. I had lost my only love, and all this acclaim was meaningless. I felt tears flood and burn my eyes. I did not want them all to see, and I stumbled from the stage toward the door.

The applause swelled again, and I heard a voice in the tumult. "Poor fellow, he's completely overcome."

BOTH SOLITUDE AND SURCEASE from pain I found at the City of the Moon. Eldridge had a month's lecturing commitments to meet in England, and Sally had disappeared. Louren told me casually that she had taken two weeks' vacation for a tour of Italy. At the City of the Moon an airmail letter from her, postmarked Padua, confirmed this. She sent congratulations, and regrets that her efforts to see me before I left London had failed. This was not surprising, for I had taken the first available flight for Africa. She would, she wrote, return to the City of the Moon at the end of the month. The letter was like a message from the grave. I burned it.

Louren visited the site for one day. He sensed the gap between us, was puzzled by it, and tried to reach across it. I could not respond. But I could not find it in myself to hate him.

Ral did not intrude on the private world in which I now lived.

This was the world of Huy Ben-Amon, warrior and poet. Language is my greatest talent, it comes to me without effort. I had followed every detail of Eldridge's translations and now taught myself Punic, thus giving myself the key to the golden scrolls.

The third book was a continuation of the history of Opet up to the lifetime of the poet, and it was as fascinating as the two that preceded it. But the true magic for me was in the remaining two golden books. These were the poems and songs of Huy himself. Here was Huy writing an ode to the shiny wing of the bird of the sun, his battle-axe. He described how it was forged and shaped, and when he wrote of the four vultures and the four suns I looked up with wonder at the axe that hung above my desk, convinced that it was the weapon of the poem. With Huy I heard the gleaming blade moan in flight, heard the snick of the edge into bone.

Then the mood changed and Huy was the priest walking with his gods, sure of them, tending to their mysteries. Huy kneeling alone in silent prayer. Huy lifting his arms in greeting to Baal. Then again he was the roistering fellow, tipping the jug of wine, laughing in the firelight. Or, in one of the most intense of the poems, he was the true companion, describing his joy in the company of another man, the spice of dangers faced together and overcome. He ended this section with the line, "Lannon Hycanus, you are more than king of Opet, you are my friend."

Reading this, I felt that to have had the friendship of Huy was to have had something of value.

Then the mood of the poet changed yet again and he was a lover, bemused by the beauty of his sweetheart, Tanith, whose eyes shone green as the deep pool in the temple of Astarte. Then suddenly Tanith was dead, and the poet cried his grief. And his lament was mine, his voice mine, his terrors and triumphs my own. It began to seem that Huy was I, and I was Huy.

But soon reality shattered my fragile fairyland. On the same aircraft Louren and Sally arrived at the City of the Moon.

I tried to hide, spending each day in the archives to avoid them. Still there was the dreaded evening meal, trying to join in the banter, trying not to notice the intimate exchanges between them. Twice Louren came to me. "There's something wrong, Ben."

"No, Louren. I swear." And I escaped to Ral's quiet company and the labor of cataloguing, photographing, packing the jars.

Besides these, I found another distraction. The cavern, sealed for two thousand years, was devoid of any life form when we opened it. Now it was reestablishing an ecology—first the tiny midge flies, then ants, spiders, moths, and finally the little brown gecko lizards. I started making a film record of this colonization. It was while doing this that I made my last major discovery.

I was alone in the archives, close by the wall on which was graven the image of the sun, when one of the geckos ran across the stone floor. At the spot where we had discovered the great battle-axe it was stalking a white moth. Quickly I set my camera and waited while the lizard approached for its kill.

The lizard froze as I exploded the flashbulb, the body of the moth crammed in its mouth. Then it darted toward the corner beneath the image of the sun god, and disappeared. Intrigued, I crawled over to examine the place where I had last seen it. There was a faint crack, plugged with dust, separating wall and floor.

My heart started to pound, and I reached for my penknife. As I probed, the blade of my knife slipped in to its full length. Frantically I followed the crack along the floor, till abruptly it turned ninety degrees and climbed the wall. Here the crack was all but invisible.

I jumped up, alive for the first time since my return from London. I ran back to the guard hut at the entrance to the tunnel. "Get Mr. Sturvesant," I said. "Ask him to come here right away."

I WAS on my knees below the sun image when Louren arrived. "Lo," I said. "Come over here. I want to show you something."

"Hey, Ben! This is the first time I've seen you smile in weeks. You had me worried." He slapped my shoulder, laughing.

Ten minutes later he was laughing no longer. His face was cold and intent. He stared at the wall, and it seemed to me that he was listening to a voice I could not hear. Slowly he approached the sun image. He laid his hand against the center of the disk, his fingers spread, pressing against it.

For a few seconds nothing happened. Then suddenly, without a sound, the whole wall began to revolve upon a concealed axis.

"How did you do that, Lo?" I whispered.

His tone as he replied was puzzled. "I just knew, that's all."

We were both silent, staring into a further dark passage.

"Get the light, Ben." I fetched one of the portable lights, and he took it from my hand. Before us a flight of stone steps slanted down into the earth. He pointed at two large circular objects that lay across the top steps. "What's this?" he asked.

"Shields," I told him. "War shields."

"Someone dropped them in a hurry."

We stepped over them and started down the staircase.

"No dust in here," Louren remarked.

"No," I agreed. "The seal of the door was tight." Our words should have warned me, but I was lost in wonder.

At the bottom of the staircase we reached a T-junction. On our right the passage led to a gate which was bolted. On the left it descended another twisting staircase. "Let's see what's behind the gate," I suggested, my voice choking with excitement.

We went to it and found the bolts were not locked. Instead a thread of gold wire was twisted around the jamb, and a heavy clay seal closed the gate. On the seal was a crudely wrought animal figure, and the words, "Lannon Hycanus. Gry-Lion of Opet, king of Punt and the four kingdoms."

"Give me your knife," Louren said.

"Lo, we can't—"

"Give it to me, damn you!" His voice was shaking. "You know what this is? It's the treasury, the gold vaults of Opet!"

"Don't do it, Lo," I protested, but he took the seal in his bare hands and ripped it from the gate. Then he flung his weight against the bars. The gate opened, and we ran forward.

The treasury of Opet lay before us with all its fabulous wealth untouched. We stood in silence and stared, awestruck.

Ivory was stacked along one wall of the chamber; it must have been a vast treasure two thousand years ago. The metals were stacked against the opposite wall: tons of copper, silver, lead, antimony. There was also a group of ebony chests, the lids decorated with ivory and mother-of-pearl inlay. "Don't do it, Lo," I protested again as he began ripping them open. They were filled with precious stones and clumsy pieces of jewelry—collars, brooches, necklaces and rings. There were bolts of linen and silk that crumbled to dust at the touch.

"The gold," Louren muttered. "Where is the gold?" He hurried on down the aisle, and then stopped. In a recess off the main chamber, behind another gate, the gold, cast in the usual finger molds, was stacked in neat piles.

Its full value, we determined later, was in excess of $150,000,000. In the same recess as the gold were two small wooden chests that yielded 26,000 carats of diamonds of every color and shape, adding additional millions to the total value. No other treasure of antiquity could compare with this profusion.

"No word of this must leak out, Ben. You understand what might happen if it did?" Louren stood with a finger of solid gold in each hand, looking down at the piles of treasure. "This is enough to kill for, even to start a war."

"What do you want me to do, Lo? I must have help in here. It'll take weeks. Ral or Sally could—"

"No!" He turned on me ferociously. "No one is to come here but us. I'll leave orders with the guards. And I'll help you myself."

Until six that evening we explored the vault. "Let's find out where the other branch of the tunnel leads," I suggested.

"No." Louren stopped me. "I want to keep normal hours here. The others mustn't guess that we're up to something."

At dinner Louren explained that no one was any longer allowed in the tunnel because he and I were attempting an experiment. It was a difficult evening. Overwrought by the day's excitement, I found myself laughing too loudly, drinking too much. The agony of my jealousy was more intense than ever, yet I could not hate them. I loved them both, and it was the harder to bear for that.

There would be no sleep for me that night, so I sought some distraction. Calming myself as best I could, I went across to the repository. The night watchman greeted me sleepily. I went to the safe and took out the fourth book of Huy. I opened the scroll at random and reread Huy's ode to his battle-axe, the gleaming wing of the bird of the sun. Why had a thing so well beloved been thrown so carelessly aside? What had happened to the axeman Huy, and his king and his city? I read on, sampling those sections of the scroll which were still unknown to me.

Then, just as the new day was being born, I came upon a heart-felt cry from the depths of Huy's being which touched a new response in me. As in base earth lay hidden the purest gold, Huy pleaded, so in his own distorted clay were treasures concealed.

I read the passage through half a dozen times, checking my translation. Finally I accepted the fact that Huy Ben-Amon was like me. *A cripple.*

I LAID the golden book away in its place and walked slowly back toward my hut. From Louren's doorway Sally came toward me, her gown ghostly pale in the gray light. I stood still, hoping she would not see me, but then I heard her startled gasp.

"It's all right, Sally. It's only me."

"Ben?" We stared at each other in silence. "How long . . . ?"

"Long enough," I answered. "I didn't mean to spy."

"I believe you." Her voice was sad. "Ben, I want to explain."

"You don't have to."

"I don't want you to think—well, that I'm so terrible. I couldn't help it, truly." She was sobbing now, silently.

"I know," I said, and took her gently to her room.

"Oh, Ben, I tried so hard, but it was too much for me. He had me in some kind of spell, from the very first moment I saw him. I didn't want to hurt you. Oh, Ben, what shall I do?"

"Has Lo said what he's going to do? Has he told you he . . . will leave Hilary and marry you?"

"No! No, for him it's just a little adventure."

I said nothing, watching her lovely, tortured face, glad at least that she realized Louren was the hunter and she the quarry. There had been many Sallys in his life; there would be many more.

"If there's anything I can do, Sally"—I moved toward the door—"just tell me."

"Ben." She stopped me. "Ben, do you still love me?"

I nodded without hesitation. "Yes, I still love you."

"Thank you." She sighed softly. "I don't think I could have taken it if you had turned away from me."

"I'll never do that," I said, and walked out into the dawn.

LOUREN and I descended the staircase beyond the sun image. While he gloated over the stacks of gold I watched his face, trying diligently to find hatred for him in my heart. But when he looked up and smiled at me I could only answer with a smile.

"Let's have a look at the rest of it now," he said.

The left fork of the tunnel took us through a short passage to a solid wall. Carved here was an inscription which I translated aloud. "'You, who come here to interrupt the sleep of the kings of Opet, do so at your peril. May the curse of Astarte and great Baal hound you to your graves.'"

Louren nodded seriously, then stepped to the stone door, seeking the trigger to the pivot mechanism. The pressure point was again the symbol of the sun god, Baal. The door swung open, and we went through into the tomb of the kings of Opet.

The silence in the narrow vaulted tomb was oppressive. The air had a heavy musty quality to it. Along each wall stood the sarcophagi of the kings, forty-seven coffins, carved of massive granite and engraved with the mighty names that had echoed through the golden books of Huy.

The last was empty, its lid propped against the wall. On the

floor at its foot a man lay, face upward, his helmet missing, his red-gold hair and beard forming a soft frame for the wizened features. His breastplate had been removed, and the broken shaft of an arrow protruded from the left side of his chest. He wore a kilt of leather studded with bronze rosettes, and on his shins were greaves of bronze. His arms were at his sides, his heels together. The body had been laid out with obvious care.

Over him stooped another figure, kneeling like a man in prayer—a figure in full armor, with only the helmet and breastplate discarded. Long black hair hung forward to conceal his face. Both hands clutched at his chest, into which a sword was plunged, its hilt securely anchored against the stone slabs of the floor. Here was a man in the attitude of final escape from the shame of defeat.

In the face of this ancient tragedy neither Louren nor I could speak. There was no doubt as to the identity of these human husks. Lannon Hycanus, the last king of Opet, lay on the cold stone floor. Above him knelt his friend and high priest, Huy Ben-Amon.

I felt choked with a sense of destiny, with a cold, aching dread. Huy Ben-Amon, axeman of the gods, was *a hunchback.*

I had to see his face! I knelt and touched his gaunt shoulder, covered by a tunic of brittle yellow linen. It was the lightest touch, a breath almost, but the corpse of Huy Ben-Amon slid down onto the body of the king, and the two figures burst into dust. There was nothing left of them but the metal of armor and sword, and two hanks of hair, one gold and one sable.

I stood up, choking with the yellow dust; it smelled of mushrooms. Louren Sturvesant and I stared at each other without speaking. We had witnessed a wonder beyond description.

I AWOKE from a screaming nightmare of blood and smoke, of black faces and sweat-polished bodies lit by roaring flames. I switched on the bedside light and looked at my watch. It was still early, a little before eleven. I threw back the sheets and stood up, surprised to find my legs shaky and my breathing ragged and painful. My body felt fever-hot. I went to the washstand and swallowed three aspirins. The effort left me trembling.

Without really knowing why, I pulled on my dressing gown and

went outside. I felt the horror of my nightmare still upon me as I hurried toward my office and glanced about me nervously. The shadows of the trees were dark and ugly. No sooner had I slammed the office door behind me than something scratched against it from the outside, a clawing animal sound that ripped at my nerves.

I needed a weapon. I looked around desperately and saw the great battle-axe of Huy on the wall above my desk. I snatched it down and backed into a corner, holding it ready.

There was a sheaf of papers on my desk. It moved toward me. Gooseflesh crawled over my body. The square of paper wavered, crept across my desk, and spread white bats' wings. Then it launched into flight, coming at my face. I saw its open mouth ringed with teeth, heard its shrill cries as it attacked. I shouted and struck the thing down, and black blood spurted from it.

I sank to my knees, feeling weak and terribly afraid. A cough took hold of my body and shook it until my vision burst into bright lights. My mouth was filled with salty wetness, and I spat a glob of bright blood. Suddenly I knew what was happening to me.

Louren and I had passed beyond two sealed doorways and down into the depths of a tomb closed for two thousand years. There we had breathed air heavy with the spores of *cryptococcus neuromyces.* In my eagerness I had not given thought to the fungus danger, even when I smelled the mushroom odor in the tomb of the kings. Now the poisons were pouring into my brain.

"Louren!" I gasped. "I must find Louren."

Clutching the axe, I staggered out into a night that seemed to me thick with smoke and flames, dark shapes and strange sounds. I ran, burst into Louren's hut. "Louren!" I screamed.

The light went on. Sally was alone in Louren's bed. She sat up. "Ben, what is it? You're bleeding!"

"Where is Lo?"

"I don't know. He *was* here. What's the trouble?"

"*Neuromyces.*" I coughed. "Louren and I have opened a secret passage. It's infected with the spores. I'm sure he's down there now. I'm going to him." I stopped to breathe. Sally was out of bed, slipping into her gown. "Get Ral and bring respirators," I gasped. "I'll prop the doors open. Down steps. Turn left at bottom."

I ran for the cliffs, through the smoke and fire and darkness. The walls of the temple towered above me, walls long gone. The great towers of Baal pointed to the moon, lit by the flames of a burning city. Women were screaming, burning alive with their children. Dead men lay strewn in my path, their faces terrible.

"Louren!" I shouted, and ran on through the temple. The enemy were crowding in on my path, dark and savage. The mighty axe spun silver circles in the firelight and I was through them, running.

I reached the cavern, saw it lit by guttering torches around the emerald pool. For a moment, with a last enormous effort of will, I forced my brain to discount this fantasy and to recognize reality. I saw the wooden guard hut at the far edge of the cavern.

"Good God, are you all right, Doctor?" the guard cried.

"Mr. Sturvesant—is he in the tunnel?"

"He went in some time back."

I hurried into the archives. I was smelling smoke and could hear the clamor of a dying city in my ears. Before the image of the sun god I let the great battle-axe slip from my hands. I pushed the stone door and propped it open with one of the war shields. Halfway down the staircase I saw a glow of light from the tomb below.

The door, inscribed with its curse of the gods, stood open, the hinge jammed by the cable of the portable light. Louren lay on his back at the foot of the huge granite sarcophagus of Lannon Hycanus, the last king of Opet. His face was deathly pale, his eyes closed, and blood stained the corners of his mouth.

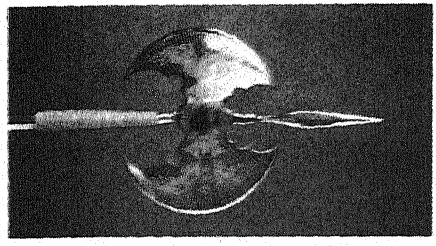
With the last of my strength I staggered to where he lay and dropped on my knees. I tried to lift him. His head flopped helplessly back and more blood ran out of his mouth. "Louren!" I cried, holding him to my chest. "Oh God, please help me!"

He opened his eyes, and I saw the first shadows of death darkening them. "Ben," he whispered. I could scarcely hear him. "All the way, partner?"

"All the way, Lo." He was quiet for a while, then suddenly he stirred again, and when he spoke it was in a clear, strong voice.

"Fly!" he said. "Fly for me, bird of the sun." And the life went out of him.

I knelt over him, feeling my own senses reel. The world turned and swung beneath me. I slipped over the edge of it, down into the swirling darkness of time. Down into a kind of death, a kind of life, for in my dying I dreamed a dream. In my poisoned sleep of death which lasted a moment and a million years I dreamed of long-dead men in a time long past.



Part Two

WHEN Lannon Hycanus and his fleet came at last to the Bay of the Little Fish on the farthest southerly shores of the great lake, there remained but two of the thirty days of the prophecy.

It was already dark when the ten ships anchored, and their lamps smeared long paths of light across the black waters. Looking out across fields of papyrus, Lannon heard footsteps on the deck behind him. He turned and saw the unmistakable shape of his friend. "Huy," he greeted him. "Have they come yet?"

"Not yet, but they will before morning." The hunchback moved closer to his prince. "You must sleep, my lord. You'll have need of a steady hand and a clear eye on the morrow."

"Sometimes it seems I have ten wives, not nine." Lannon laughed. "No, old friend, tonight I think I will hunt sleep with as little success as I have hunted the gry-lion these twenty-eight days since my father's funeral." He turned back to the rail. The other nine ships were close, the ships of the nine families come to see him kill his gry-lion, to make good his claim to the throne of Opet and the four kingdoms.

"Look at them, Huy! Did their ancestors ever foresee, when the prophecy was made, the day when the gry-lion would pass from the land? My father killed on the twenty-fifth day, and they said even then that the beast was finished. Now we have hunted every covert where it has been seen in the last two hundred years."

He began pacing the deck, pausing to look down into the hull where tiers of naked slaves slept chained upon their benches, before he turned back to Huy. "This reach of the swamps is the last place in all my kingdoms which might hide a gry-lion. If it does not— Huy, is there no other way in which I might prove my right?"

"None, my lord." Huy shook his head with regret. "Unless there is a gry-lion taken, Opet will have no king. The Council of Nine will rule. Let us not talk of it. A jug of hot spiced wine is prepared for you. It will help you to sleep."

"Will you make an oracle for tomorrow, my priest of Baal?"

"If the oracle is unfavorable, will that help you sleep?"

Lannon barked with harsh laughter. "You are right, as always." He had turned to go when a voice shouted hoarsely from the papyrus fields across the water to the flagship.

"Open your lines for a friend!"

Lannon hurried back to the rail. "He has come!" he exclaimed.

A small canoe bumped alongside and Mursil, huntmaster of house Barca, came up through the entry port, a huge figure, ruddy-faced from sun and wine. He was followed closely by a tiny brown Bushman who looked about him out of slanted eyes, terrified at the unfamiliar surroundings.

"My lord." Mursil knelt. "I bring good news. This one"—he reached for the naked Bushman—"has found what we seek."

Lannon turned triumphantly to Huy. "The gods have decided. House Barca will have its chance once more."

IN THE dawn the Bushman led Lannon, Mursil and Huy along a buffalo path—a green tunnel of reeds, the papyrus closing overhead, the earth swampy underfoot. Trailing after them was a procession some four hundred strong, since certain of the nobles would not come ashore to look for the gry-lion without a thick screen of archers and axemen around them.

AGRICULTURAL

They came out at last through the reeds into a natural arena, fenced on three sides by the dark papyrus, a circle of lush grass about half a mile across. Lying in the middle of it were six dark objects not immediately identifiable.

Mursil questioned the pygmy scout in a dialect, then translated. "My lord, he says they are dead buffalo killed by the gry-lion."

"Where is the beast?" Lannon asked, and the Bushman pointed.

"It is there," Mursil explained. "Behind the second carcass. He can see the tips of its ears."

"At that distance? I do not believe it."

"It is true, my lord. He has the eyes of an eagle."

"At your peril, if he is mistaken," Lannon warned. Then he turned to Huy. "Make ready, my bird of the sun."

While his attendants stripped Lannon to a loincloth, the rest of the party spread out along the edge of the dark reeds. A silence fell as Lannon turned to face them. His hair hung to his shoulders, golden and gleaming; he was a godlike figure among his dark-haired people.

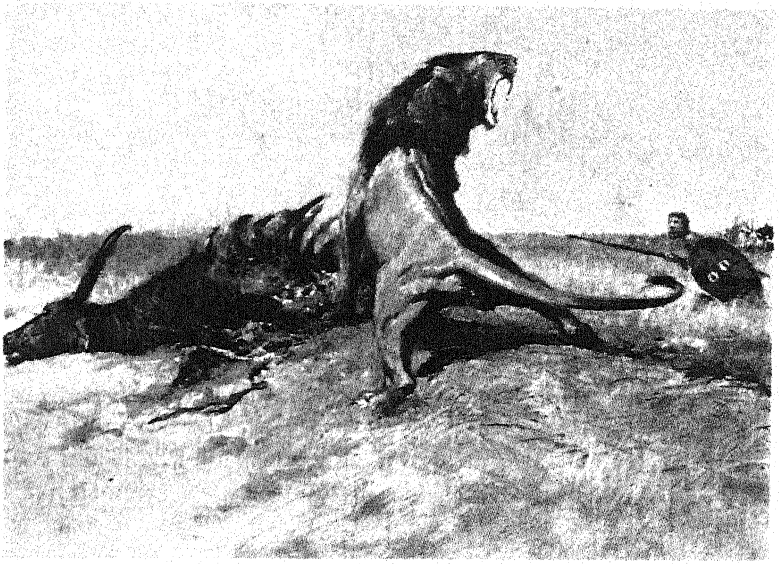
"I make claim to the city of Opet and the four kingdoms," he said, his voice carrying clearly to them all.

Huy, who wore a leather breastplate and armguards over a short linen tunic and bronze-studded leather kilt, took Lannon's weapons to him. First, the long oval shield of buffalo hide, painted with a pair of white and yellow eyes to represent the aggressive stare which would trigger a predator's charge. "May this shield guard you well," Huy whispered. Next, the lion spear, its shaft as thick as Lannon's wrist and in length twice his height, its wide blade honed to a razor-edge. "May this blade find the heart," Huy said softly and then, more loudly, "Roar for me, Gry-Lion of Opet."

Lannon touched Huy's shoulder. "Fly for me, bird of the sun."

With the shield on his back, careful not to show the eyes, Lannon strode toward the waiting beast. He remembered the advice of his oldest huntmaster: "Make him come to you at an angle. He charges with head held low. There is one place only to strike—the base of the neck, between spine and shoulder."

Then the words of the only man he had ever known who had faced the gry-lion, his father, the forty-sixth Gry-Lion of Opet:



"Once the spear is in, cling to it with your life, my son. For that shaft is all that keeps the gry-lion from you till he dies."

Lannon walked on steadily, watching the black carcass of the buffalo, seeing no sign of the beast he was hunting. He could hear his own heart beating in the silence. Suddenly he saw movement, just the flick of two ears, and he knew it was there, waiting for him. He forced himself on, his feet heavy with fear.

Then the gry-lion stood, and Lannon gasped aloud. Tall as a man and heavy as a horse, this was the most dangerous cat ever known. With its long white fangs bared, its black tufted tail swishing, it watched Lannon approach.

He was a hundred paces from it when the great cat crouched, ears flattened against the skull. Lannon could see its eyes now, yellow eyes in the angular, tawny face. He walked on, and the gry-lion's brown ruff of mane came erect. Fifty paces, and the beast growled. It was a belly-jarring sound, like a storm's crash of surf. Lannon stood frozen.

Long seconds he hesitated. Then, with an abrupt movement born of fear, he swept the shield from his back and showed the

eyes. The black tufted tail lifted and stayed rigid. The great beast dropped its head low against its chest and charged.

Lannon went up on his toes, the shackles of fear fallen from him, and bounded toward the charging cat. He angled his run across the gry-lion's front, forcing it to keep turning toward him, exposing the neck and the side of the chest. As he ran, the spear blade danced ahead of him in the sun.

The gry-lion came fast, and very low, closing for the kill. At the last possible instant Lannon lifted the spear tip slightly, centering it on the vital spot at the base of the neck, and the gry-lion came onto the spear with its whole weight driving it.

The blade plunged in, and the shock of the impact drove the shaft up and hurled Lannon backward—but he held the spear fast. As the gry-lion roared in its death throes, the shaft whipped and thrashed in Lannon's grip, smashing against his ribs. Then suddenly the great beast reared. The shaft of the spear snapped like a twig in Lannon's hands, and he was thrown toward the heavens. Then earth thumped the breath from his lungs. Painfully he sat up and looked around him.

Ten paces away the gry-lion was caught in its final spasm. Its back arched, the legs stiffened, the mouth opened wide, and with one last pitiful groan it died.

The watchers cheered, and began moving toward the tiny figure of the king out on the grassy plain. But Huy was running. On legs too long for his crumpled trunk he seemed to dance over the ground, the vulture axe on his shoulder. He was halfway to where Lannon sat when he saw a second gry-lion stand up from behind the carcass of another buffalo. "Lannon! Behind you!"

The king looked back and saw it. It was the female, lighter in color, daintier in build, but notoriously more savage than the male. It was stalking him with deadly concentration.

"Baal speed me!" Huy prayed as he saw his prince try to struggle to his feet. The gry-lion was slinking low, moving forward in short dashes. Huy ran toward it, shouting, "Here! Come to me!"

The cat noticed him for the first time. It lifted its head and watched him, the eyes yellow and splendid. "Yes!" shouted Huy. "Here I am!"

The beast charged. Huy braced to meet it, the axe on his shoulder, fastening his gaze on the black diamond pattern between the gry-lion's eyes. "For Baal!" he howled, as the cat covered the last few paces.

The axe moaned in flight. Its blade split the great beast's skull, and its handle was instantly torn from Huy's grip as the full weight of the dead cat smashed into his chest.

When Huy opened his eyes Lannon Hycanus, the forty-seventh Gry-Lion of Opet, knelt over him in the sunlight. "You fool," said the king. "Oh, you brave little fool!"

"Brave, yes," whispered Huy painfully. "But fool never, Majesty." And he saw the relief dawn in Lannon's eyes.

THEY hung the gry-lions' skins on the mast below the standard of house Barca, and Lannon received the oaths of allegiance from the heads of the nine houses of Opet. As soon as the ceremony was over he ordered the fleet to sail for the city.

The next day, when the cliffs came up on the horizon, glowing dusky red in the sunlight, Mursil, accompanied by the little Bushman, came to Lannon and knelt. "You sent for us, Majesty."

"Your reward, Mursil. What should it be?"

"Gold, if it please you, my lord."

"Huy, write an order for five fingers of gold."

"May Baal shine upon you always!"

Lannon pointed to the little man. "What is he named?"

"Xhai, my lord."

"Ask him what he desires. Freedom, perhaps?"

Mursil and the Bushman spoke for a long while before the huntmaster turned back to the king. "He wishes to hunt always with the slayer of the gry-lion. He thinks, my lord"—Mursil was ill at ease—"he thinks you are a god, and he wants to belong to you."

Lannon laughed. "Then let him be a master of the royal hunt, with the pay and privileges. Take him, Huy, and teach him our language."

As they approached the city the war fleet of Opet streamed out from the harbor to meet them. The crews saw the lion skins spread on the mainmast and a cheer roared out. At the stone

jetty below the city, thousands waited in their most brilliant robes to welcome the king. Lannon's wives were the first to greet him. Nine of them, one from each of the noble houses, proud and beautiful, knelt to call him majesty for the first time.

Huy looked at them with an aching heart. These were not the pliant, brainless servant girls whose company was all he ever had. These were full women. He needed such a one to share his life. He had carried his suit to the great houses, and had it rejected. They saw no further than his back; he could not blame them.

He slipped away and went to his own house near the temple. His household were all there to greet him, doting and doddering, fussing about him with their gray heads and toothless gums. When they had bathed and fed him, he escaped to his sleeping quarters, but he had not lain there for long when a chattering group of Lannon's older children broke through the feeble defenses of his slaves and invaded his room as if by right.

With a sigh he abandoned rest and sent for his lute. As he began to sing, the slaves, one at a time, crept into the room and sat quietly along the wall. Huy Ben-Amon was home again.

IN THE year 533 from the founding of Opet, six months after he had taken the gry-lion and claimed the four kingdoms, Lannon Hycanus went out to march around his borders. He was twenty-nine years old in that spring, a year older than his high priest.

He marched with two legions of axemen and archers. In place of cavalry, for no attempt to bring horses in from the north had succeeded, there were twenty-five elephants with castles of archers on their backs. Also on Lannon's march went the high priest and a dozen lesser ones, together with engineers, physicians, armorers, cooks, slaves and camp followers. The whole unwieldy column spread out over fifteen miles.

"With Xhai's help I intend to hunt in the south kingdom," Lannon told Huy. "Hunts such as never were. At Zeng, however, we will march north in battle array. We will lead the Zeng legions and our own on a slave-taking that will warn the black tribes that a new king reigns in Opet."

Six months after their departure from Opet, Lannon's legions

reached the range of blue mountains that marked the borders of the southern kingdom. Here they stopped to trade with Xhai's people, the Bushmen.

"From where do these sun stones come?" Huy asked Rib-Addi, the master of the treasury, as he examined a yellow diamond the size of an acorn, bought for some glass beads and arrowheads.

"It is said that the little men search in the gravel beds of the rivers, and also the edges of the lakes," Rib-Addi explained.

In four days the treasury of Opet had acquired five large pottery jars of diamonds, and eighty-six Bushman children for slaves. They made excellent hunters and were put into the care of Xhai. Only a dozen or so of the tiny creatures died of terror or heartbreak in the subsequent journeyings.

Then Lannon broke camp and turned north. Soon they were passing through the fringes of the wide gold belt that ran across the middle kingdom. It was on this belt that the wealth of Opet was based. The king's stone finders had developed an almost supernatural ability to trace the reefs in which the gold was hidden, so that the rich ore could be prized from the earth by black slaves working naked in the narrow, stifling stopes.

Lannon paused in his march to inspect many of these workings. At one mine the ore had been exhausted. The mine must be returned to Astarte, mother of moon and earth. She had given of her bounty; she must receive it back.

Lannon, as was his right, selected the messengers, conferring with his slavemasters to decide which slaves would be of least loss to the labor force. Those chosen were led, wearing the symbolic chains of the sacrifice, down into the workings for the last time, shuffling, stooped, coughing with the lung disease of miners. Huy delegated one of his priests to supervise the sending. When his emissary had emerged from the pit, Huy led the praise to Astarte while the work of refilling the mine began. This would further placate the earth mother and allow new gold to grow.

THREE hundred days after leaving the city, Lannon's column was climbing the foothills of the Zeng Mountains. These hills were the larder of Opet, terraced and thickly cultivated. The cita-

del here was a hilltop town named after the twelfth Gry-Lion of Opet, Zeng-Hanno. Here there were temples to both Baal and Astarte, and here Huy spent twenty days in synod with his priests and priestesses. Here too he inspected his own legion, the Sixth Ben-Amon, which was one of the two stationed at Zeng and the only legion of Opet composed entirely of warriors of the blood.

Preparations began now for the slave-taking which Lannon had planned, so Huy spent much time with his priest-officers. One night they dined with him in his quarters within the temple enclosure. He invited the priestesses of Astarte, and Lannon was guest of honor. They were all decked with flowers and boisterous with wine.

Well on into the evening one of the young priests brought up the subject of the new oracle discovered among the high priestess's novices. The reverend mother turned wise old eyes on the young man, and spoke discreetly. "It is true that one novice has indeed seen beyond the veil, but the sisterhood has not yet decided to send her to the high priest for examination."

"I have not heard of this," Huy remarked with interest and a trace of accusation. For two years they had been without the services of an oracle. Fees for divination and prophecy formed a significant part of the temple income. There were also political reasons why Huy was anxious to find a new seer.

"Forgive me, Holy Father. I had meant to discuss this with you privately."

Her voice was soft, but Lannon had sharp ears and leaned across Huy to say, "Send for the wench." The priestess stiffened at his choice of words. "Let her entertain us with her prophecies."

"The king commands," Huy murmured, apologizing to the reverend mother with his eyes.

When the young woman came the company stilled. Tall and finely boned, she wore the long green robes of the novice which left her arms bare, and her smooth, lustrous skin glowed in the lamplight. Her hair, dark and soft, floated cloudlike to her shoulders. She wore the gold crescent moon of Astarte on her forehead, and her earrings were small sun stones. Her eyes were of a green that reminded Huy of the pool of Astarte in the temple at Opet.



She bowed her head before him. "Pray for me, Holy Father."

"Greet your king, my child," he murmured, and she turned to Lannon to make obeisance. "What is your name?" Huy asked.

"Tanith," she answered. It was the name of the goddess, from the ancient days of Carthage.

"It is a pretty name." Huy nodded. "I have always loved it."

"You are kind, Holy Father," she said, smiling at him. It was a smile that was warm and uplifting, and Huy Ben-Amon fell in love. He stared at her, unable to speak, feeling his cheeks flush.

Lannon broke the spell. "Make an oracle," he commanded her.

"I would speak one, my lord, but there is the matter of fee."

"Fee?" Lannon was unaccustomed to such frankness.

"Holy Father, would you set the fee?" Tanith asked Huy.

"One hundred fingers of gold." Huy spoke before he realized what he had done. It was an enormous fee and, seeing Lannon stir with anger, he hastened to add, "For this fee the Gry-Lion may put as many questions as he has fingers on his sword hand."

"I doubt that the wisdom of a child will be worth that much, but it amuses me to test this wench." Lannon looked anything but

amused. He took up his wine bowl and drank deeply, then stared at Tanith. "I go north on a mission. Speak to me of the outcome."

A cushion was brought and Tanith settled herself on it. She lowered her head and her eyes seemed to look inward. "There will be a mighty harvest," she murmured in a strange, unnatural monotone. "More than the Gry-Lion expects."

Lannon frowned. "Do you speak of a harvest of death?"

"You will take death with you, but death will return with you unknown and secretly." It was an unfavorable oracle. Huy wanted to intervene—he was regretting the whole business.

"What must I fear?" Lannon asked.

"Blackness."

"How will I find death?" Lannon was shaking with anger now.

"At the hand of a friend."

"Who will reign in Opet after me?"

"He who kills the gry-lion."

Lannon struck the wine bowl aside and it shattered on the stone floor. "The gry-lion is finished," he shouted. "I killed the last. Do you dare prophesy the death of house Barca?"

"That is your sixth question, my lord." Tanith looked up. "I cannot see the answer to it."

"Get the witch out of here," Lannon roared.

Huy signaled quickly for the high priestess to take her, and for a slave to fetch his lute. Only after his third song did Lannon laugh again.

ON THE eve of the departure of the legions from Zeng-Hanno five days later, Huy sent for the novice Tanith. It had taken all his strength of will not to send for her sooner. She was lovelier than he remembered. They walked together on the walls of the city.

"I have instructed the reverend mother that you will join the convoy to Opet, where you will enter the sisterhood of Astarte—and await my return."

"As you command, Holy Father." Her humble tone was at odds with her expression. Huy stopped and looked into her green eyes.

"The words you spoke to the king, Tanith, what did they mean?"

"I cannot explain. They came into my mind unbidden."

"Do you believe that I am appointed of the gods, Tanith?"

"I do, Holy Father." She answered with such transparent honesty and respect that Huy's reservations were set at rest. He loved her, but she was also an instrument which could be used.

"What is your destiny, Tanith?" he asked suddenly.

"I cannot see it. But I know that this—this meeting between you and me—is part of that destiny."

Huy felt his heart swell, but kept his voice gruff. "Child, as a priestess you know better than to speak like that to a man."

"Holiness, you wrong me. I did not mean as man and maid."

"How then?" demanded Huy, disappointed at the denial.

"We will find answers when we meet at Opet, Holiness." And Huy could have sworn there was teasing mockery in her eyes.

LANNON stood over a clay box in which was modeled a relief map of the great river basin. In the west were the Clouds of Baal, a mighty waterfall,* where the spray rose high into the heavens. From here the river flowed east through a deep valley and a wide plain before joining the eastern sea.

Lannon pointed out to his twenty senior officers the main features of the valley area, a hot, unhealthy place where rocky ramparts rose on each bank, heavily forested and rich with elephant herds. "Our spies have marked the main towns at which the tribes are gathered. They are mostly on the high ground, a day's march beyond the river, and it is important that each tribe be attacked on the same day."

He went on to assign to each of his commanders a target, a crossing place over the river and a return route. "There will be no danger of attack on the return march, as long as you break their spirit on the first day. Each of the tribes is at war with the others, and they will not rally to the assistance of each other." He then set a date for the attack. "Twelve days from now. That will give your legions time to reach the towns of the barbarians."

Huy's legion was to oppose one of the larger and more warlike tribes, the Vendi, whose town was on the northern bank of the

* Victoria Falls

river. He put the men into camp at the garrison fort of Sett. Fires were forbidden by day and carefully screened at night. The men were kept busy building rafts for the crossing of the great river.

Two nights before the attack a bireme landed axemen and archers on the far bank. By dawn they had rigged lines across the river. The rafts were carried to the river's edge and attached to the looped lines. The legion boarded in groups of fifty, and the elephants walked away with the lines, drawing the rafts smoothly across the river. The crossing was completed before midafternoon.

Huy was joined by Lannon, and they left a cohort to hold the crossing. Then, behind a screen of light infantry, they began the march on the barbarian town of Kal. The few herders and hunters they met were dispatched with silent arrows or swift axe strokes.

The legion halted at dusk, and ate cold meat and corn cakes while the wine carriers moved among them. "Look!" Huy touched Lannon's shoulder and pointed toward the northern hills. The sky reflected the light from thousands of cooking fires.

"A rich harvest—just as the witch prophesied." Lannon frowned. "Her words have troubled me. She preached death and darkness, betrayal by a friend." He wiped his lips before drinking from the wine bowl. "I believe she is evil."

"Sire! She is young, innocent—" Then Huy saw Lannon peering into his face, and stopped.

"What is this witch to you, my Sunbird?"

"As a maid, nothing. She belongs to the goddess."

Lannon grunted skeptically. "You are wise in all things but women, my friend. That one will bring you nothing but sorrow."

Huy stood up. "It is time to march."

After midnight they crested the first slope of the escarpment, and before them spread an open basin through which the river Kal meandered. The fires had died to points of dull red, and the huts of the town were dark, scattered thickly but without pattern.

"We estimated fifty thousand." Huy looked out across the wide valley. "We weren't far wrong." Beside him Lannon nodded.

Huy ordered out a thin screen of light infantry and bowmen to the east. Scouts had brought in four thousand of the rangy little scrub cattle belonging to the Vendi. "Take the cattle with you.

Remember Hannibal's ruse in Italia—it will serve us as well here."

Silently he led his heavy infantry and axemen to the west and set them in a crescent beyond the town. He and Lannon looked out across the sleeping huts. "Now," he said softly.

Lannon nodded. "Fly for me, bird of the sun."

"Roar for me, Gry-Lion of Opet." Huy buckled his helmet and gave an order to a centurion. The man stooped over a clay firepot, and moments later loosed a flaming arrow against the dark sky.

From the east a mass of bellowing, maddened cattle stampeded down. On their horns burned torches of pitch and grass; behind them they dragged flaming branches. They were driven on by their own terror and a line of yelling warriors. They crashed into the town, knocking down the flimsy huts, trampling the sleep-drugged Vendi who stumbled into their path. Behind them ran the warriors, clubbing down the survivors.

Huy heard a steadily growing wail from the town, the sound of thousands of terrified voices. "Hold your line," he called to his men. "Leave no gaps in the net for the fish to slip through."

The night was filled with movement and sound and flame. The Vendi milled about, screaming, as the flames spread and the grim line of marauders moved down on them.

Out of this terrible confusion order slowly emerged. The flames burned themselves out, the slavemasters began ordering the captives into squatting lines. The dawn came up, red and angry. Huy hurried through the devastation, organizing the return. The slaves were being chained when one of the centurions accosted Huy. "My lord! See how few young men there are among these."

Huy saw that this was indeed so. He picked a youth and asked him in the vernacular, "Where are your warriors?"

The youngster dropped his eyes and would not answer. The centurion half drew his sword. At the scrape of steel the boy glanced up fearfully. "They have gone north to hunt the buffalo."

"When will they return?" Huy demanded.

"Nobody can know that."

Huy turned back to the centurion. "Get the slaves moving at once. The fighting regiments of the Vendi are intact. This beacon of smoke will draw them as meat draws the vultures."

THE FILE OF ALMOST twenty-two thousand chained slaves stretched over four miles. At a labored crawl, like a crippled centipede, it wound its way down to the valley bottom. The first attack came a little after midnight. It was a full-scale attack, pressed home with murderous intent. Only training and discipline held Huy's legion together before the howling torrent that hurled itself upon them and then flowed away into the darkness.

By an hour after dawn the Vendi's tactics were clear. Each feature along the route was contested by archers and spearmen, while the flanks and rear of the column were constantly harried.

"I have never heard of this before," protested Lannon during a lull. "They behave like drilled and trained troops."

There was a place where the track crossed a narrow stream and then passed between two rounded hills. Near the ford sixteen spears had been set in the earth with, spiked upon them, the heads of legionaries who had gone ahead with the cattle. "The advance cohorts have not got through unscathed," Huy remarked.

"Sixteen from twelve hundred is hardly a disaster," Lannon replied. "And with their grisly display they have warned us that they intend to hold the ford—weak tactics, Sunbird."

As Lannon had predicted, the ford was held, and by a force Huy guessed to be twice his own. Several times he had to pull his men out of the bloody mud of the ford to rest and re-form. By now the day was baking hot and the legionaries were tiring.

Lannon had received a spear thrust, opening his cheek to the bone. A physician was stitching the wound when Huy joined the group around the king.

Lannon dismissed Huy's anxious inquiry with a chuckle. "It will leave an interesting scar," he said. Then, without moving his head, he went on. "I have discovered the solution to the mystery." He pointed across the stream to one of the twin hills. On its bare granite crest was a group of men, gathered about a central figure.

"I should have guessed it," Huy said. "The tribes have found a leader."

"Take him for me," Lannon commanded. "Nothing else is important. Take the Vendi king for me." And for the first time Huy heard fear in Lannon's voice.

HUY TIMED HIS ATTACK for the last hour before dark, when the shadows were long and the light uncertain. He chose fifty of his finest men. They stripped naked and darkened their skins with black river mud. Slave chains were shackled about their throats, but instead of iron pins, thin dry twigs were used to close the links. Finally their weapons, coated with mud to hide the glint of metal, were strapped to their backs so that they could run empty-handed. "Remember, you are slaves," Huy told them.

When they broke from the trees and ran for the river with legionaries in pursuit, carefully aimed arrows pattered among them and they howled with realistic terror. They reached the bank five hundred paces upstream from the ford. The Vendi king saw them and sent two parties of warriors to screen their crossing. A fierce skirmish flared up on the riverbank. Under cover of the tumult Huy got his group into the shelter of the forest on the far bank, where they dropped their chains. Then, hidden by the trees, he led them around and up the back slope of the hill. The sentries posted there did not see the weird blackened figures until it was too late.

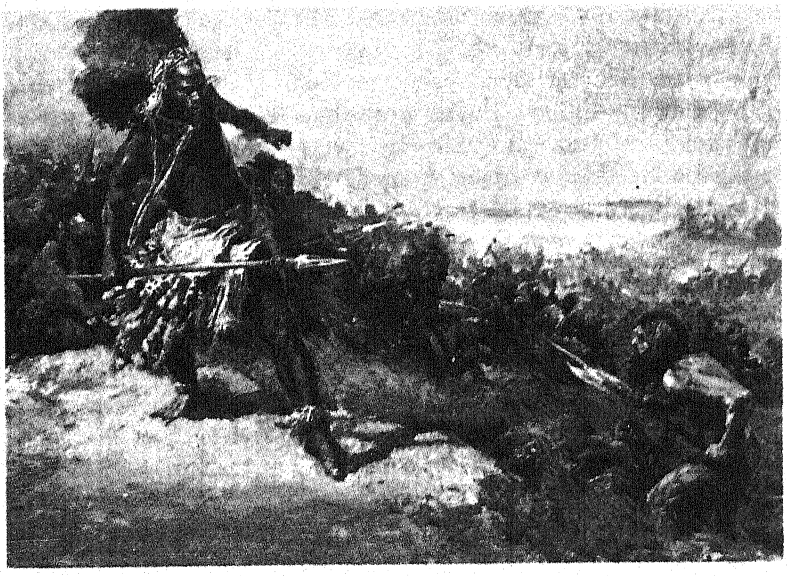
Close below the bare granite dome Huy waited, listening for the diversion Lannon had promised. At last he heard yells.

"Now!" he said softly. "All together."

Huy was twenty paces from the crest before the Vendi king sensed his presence. Two of the king's bodyguard leaped at Huy, but with a single axe stroke he killed one cleanly and took an arm off the other. He went on to the king.

He was the biggest man Huy had ever seen. The setting sun shone on the oiled black muscles of his chest and arms. He wore a proud headdress of blue heron's feathers, and around his waist a kilt of leopard tails. He moved to meet Huy, his spear held underhand, its blade seeking Huy's belly. Huy sidestepped, letting the point hiss past him.

The huge man grunted, then bellowed as the point of Huy's axe scored his ribs. He struck and slashed with his spear at the dancing figure before him. Suddenly Huy was inside the circle of the spear, probing with his axe for the femoral artery in his opponent's groin, missing it by half an inch but dropping the king to



one knee. The axe flew high as Huy went into the kill stroke, aiming at the round black skull. "For Baal!" he cried.

Then, in full stroke, he checked himself. He never knew what made him twist the weapon, presenting the flat of the blade and not the edge, so that it merely knocked the giant senseless.

About him the Vendi king's train lay dead. Huy and his band cheered and waved their weapons. From the ford a trumpet blared, and Huy watched Lannon lead the cohorts forward.

The tribesmen had seen their king cut down, and there was no spirit left in them. As the sun touched the horizon in a splendor of red and purple, Lannon's trumpets sounded again, and the slaughter and the slave-taking lasted until long after midnight.

LANNON was jubilant. "My Sunbird—it was more than I asked of you! If we had left such an enemy just one more year, only the gods know how deadly he might have become."

"Baal smiled upon me," Huy disclaimed modestly.

"And so does Lannon Hycanus. What was the harvest in slaves and cattle, Sunbird? Send for old Rib-Addi."

The master of the royal treasury came with his scrolls and his ink-stained fingers and his untrusting bookkeeper's eyes. He read out the lists of cattle and slaves.

"And the prize money taken by the Sixth Ben-Amon?" Lannon asked.

Rib-Addi looked alarmed. "I could only guess, Majesty."

"Guess then," Lannon invited him.

"As much as twenty-five thousand fingers—or as low as—"

"Do not give me your low figure. You would smell dung in an alabaster jar of perfume." Lannon turned to clasp Huy's shoulder. "Your usual share is two hundred and fifty fingers, Sunbird. How does it feel to be rich?"

"It does not sicken me."

Lannon laughed. "Rib-Addi, write in your book that Lannon Hycanus makes over *half* of his share of the prize to the legion commander, Huy Ben-Amon, for his conduct of the campaign."

"That is more than a thousand fingers!" Rib-Addi protested.

"I have learned my figures also," Lannon assured him crisply.

"It shall be written," the old man mumbled, and Huy knelt before his king in gratitude.

"Up!" Lannon ordered him. "Do not grovel for me, old friend." So Huy stood, lost in a trance of avarice, while the king rewarded each of the officers who had acted with distinction. He was rich! He could afford any luxury he had ever coveted: an estate at Zeng-Hanno, a share in one of Habbakuk Lal's trading galleys, a seat on one of the gold-mining syndicates. A secure income for life. Even the daughters of the noble houses might turn a blind eye to his back when dazzled by such gold. Then he remembered Tanith, and his spirits plunged. A priestess of Astarte could never marry.

"Do you not hear your king speak?" Lannon demanded.

"My lord, I was dreaming. What was it the Gry-Lion asked?"

"I said we should send for the barbarian king—we can deal with him before the assembled legions."

He had been chained at wrists and ankles, and two slavemasters held him in leash from a collar at the throat. He was younger than Huy had thought; his commanding presence made him seem

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older than his years. The wound in his groin had been dressed with leaves and bark, now soiled with watery discharges, and the flesh around it was swollen. He stared at his captors with hatred.

"You captured this great black beast, Huy?" Lannon returned the giant's stare and shook his head in wonder.

But Huy did not reply. He was watching the Vendi king. "What is your name?" he asked softly.

The huge head turned, the fierce eyes held his. "How do you have the tongue of Vendi?"

"I have many tongues. Tell me who you are."

"Manatassi, king of the Vendi." And Huy translated for Lannon.

"Tell him he is king no longer," Lannon snapped.

Manatassi shrugged and smiled. "Fifty thousand warriors of Vendi still call me king."

"A slave king of a slave people." Lannon laughed. "What of him, Huy? Can we afford to let him live?"

Huy tore his gaze from Manatassi and considered the question. He had conceived a proprietary interest in the slave king. He was impressed with the man's power and presence, with his military skills, and felt excitement at the idea of civilizing such a man.

"I think not." Lannon answered himself. "From the first moment I saw him I knew he was dangerous. We will send him to Baal as a messenger to express our gratitude."

"My lord." Huy dropped his voice. "I could teach this man. When we are ready we could return him to his people, and—"

"Have the birds picked out your brain?" Lannon looked at Huy in astonishment. "Why should we return him to his people?"

"To use him as an ally. Through him we could make a treaty with the tribes. We could secure our northern borders."

"Treaties with barbarians?" Lannon was angry now. "This is nonsense. One thing only will secure our borders—a sharp sword."

"My lord, please hear me out."

"No, Huy. I will have no more of it. He must die tonight, at sunset." Lannon rose abruptly to his feet and strode away.

Huy nodded to the slavemasters to take the captive away. But Manatassi stepped forward.

"Highborn!" he called to Huy.

Huy turned to him, surprised at the title of respect.

"Is it death?" Manatassi asked. Huy nodded. "I saw you argue for me," Manatassi said. "First you turned the blade that should have killed me. Now you speak for me. Why?"

"I do not know. I cannot explain."

"You feel the bond between us." Manatassi's voice sank low. "The bond of the spirits. You feel it between us."

"No!" Huy shook his head, and hurried away to his tent.

IN THE sunset they brought Manatassi to the riverbank below the walls of Sett, dressed in a cloak worked with the symbols of Baal and wearing the golden chains of the sacrifice. When they led the doomed king forward his terrible eyes fastened on Huy's and seemed to draw out his soul. But Huy began the ritual, making obeisance to the flaming god in the western sky. All the while he felt those eyes eating into the core of his existence.

Huy's assistant offered him the vulture axe. The slavemasters lifted the cloak from the shoulders of the sacrifice and removed even his sandals, so that, except for the golden chains, he was naked. At Huy's signal the slavemasters would stretch him upon the ground, neck ready for the axe.

Huy hesitated, held by the fierce eyes. With an effort he tore his gaze free and looked downward. He had started to give the signal, but his hand froze. He was staring at Manatassi's bare feet. Around him the watchers stirred restlessly. Once the sun had set it would be too late. Still Huy stared at Manatassi's feet.

"The sun goes, priest. Strike!" Lannon called angrily.

"My lord, there is something you must see. Look!" Huy pointed. Lannon strode forward and frowned on a quick intake of breath. Then he stepped back, making the sun sign to avert evil. For Manatassi's feet were deeply divided between the toes like the claws of some giant bird.

"The feet of the sacred sunbird," Huy said, and there was a murmur from the watchers. Huy raised his voice. "I declare this man god-marked. He cannot be sent as a messenger."

As he spoke the sun dropped below the rim of the world and there was a chill and a dankness in the air.

BACK IN HIS TENT Lannon sat in a towering, shaking rage. "You defied me! You think to place this barbarian beyond my reach. God-marked, indeed! You and I both know that many of Baal's decisions are made by Huy Ben-Amon, for Huy Ben-Amon."

"Majesty!" Huy gasped at the accusation, at the blasphemy.

"You aspire to play the game of power and politics with me?"

"It is not true, my lord. I would not dare."

"You *would* dare, priest. You would dare to steal the teeth from the mouth of the living Gry-Lion if the fancy came upon you."

"My lord, I am your true, your most loyal—"

"Tread lightly, priest. You presume on friendship. You fly high by my favor alone. I can throw you down as readily."

"I know this very well, my lord."

"Then give me this barbarian."

"He is not mine to give, my lord. He belongs to the gods."

Lannon let out a bellow of rage, snatched up a heavy amphora of wine and hurled it at Huy's head. Huy ducked nimbly. The amphora slapped into the leather side of the tent and dropped to the ground without breaking. Lannon, his eyes glittering blue and deadly, towered over Huy. "Go!" he said. "Quickly. Before I—"

Huy did not wait to hear the rest of it.

LANNON set out for Opet the next morning with his bodyguard, and with Xhai the Bushman as always at his heels. Huy stood on the wall and watched him go with a chill of apprehension. Lannon was smiling at the cheering crowds, but when he looked up and saw Huy his smile changed to a fierce scowl.

Feeling alone and very vulnerable, Huy went back to his tent, where Manatassi lay dying of the wound in his groin. The slave king moaned as an old slave woman bathed his body, trying to lower the fever. She looked up as Huy entered and shook her head.

"Send for a slavemaster," Huy ordered irritably. "Have him strike off these chains."

In the noon of the second day Huy climbed to a high place where the sun god's presence seemed to fill the earth and sky. He sang the prayer of approach, but he did so in a perfunctory fashion, for he was angry with his gods and wanted them to be aware of it.

"Great Baal"—he came swiftly to his protest—"I have saved this one who bears your marks, and at great cost. I have weakened the position of your high priest—and to what purpose? Is it your intention that this god-marked barbarian die now?"

Huy paused. Dare he use stronger terms? No. He had offended the king, best not offend the gods also. So he spread his hands in the sun sign and sang the praise of Baal with all the skill at his command. When the last pure note had died upon the air, he went down to the camp, and with a bronze razor he lanced the vile swelling in the slave king's groin. Manatassi screamed in his delirium, and Huy poulticed the open wound with boiled corn wrapped in a linen cloth, scalding hot to drain the poisons.

By evening the fever had passed, and Manatassi lay in exhausted but natural sleep. Huy lifted a bowl of wine in a salute to the giant. "The gods have given you to me. You live under my protection, and I pledge it to you." And he drained the bowl.

Huy sat stooped over a scroll, writing on it in sooty black ink. Across the tent, on a mattress of straw, the slave king lifted his head to study the strange little man who spent so much time at this curious activity. Manatassi's first thoughts had been of escape, but his weakness had forced him to reconstruct his plans. Thanks to the power this hunchback seemed to wield he was safe for now, and there was much he could learn here.

At the movement of Manatassi's head, Huy was on his feet. "Bring food," he shouted to the old slave woman, and settled down on a cushion beside the straw pallet. While the black king ate, Huy explained to him the theory of symbolism, showing that the moon was not Astarte herself, but her sign. "When we reach Opet," Huy told him, "I will dedicate you to the service of the gods, for their mark is on you. And I have chosen a god-name for you. From henceforth you will be called Timon, after the priest-warrior in the reign of the fifth Gry-Lion. A great man."

"Timon." The slave king tested the sound of it, not understanding but content to wait and learn. "Highborn," he asked, "the marks you make upon the leather—what are they?"

Huy fetched the scroll and plunged into an explanation of the

writing process. He was rewarded by Timon's quick grasp of the principles of the phonetic alphabet. On a scrap of leather he wrote Timon's name, and in unison they spelled it out aloud, Timon laughing delightedly at his great achievement.

Across the clay game box the Roman consul pressed his legions into Hannibal's soft center, which gave as Hannibal's Spaniards and Gauls withdrew there at his orders.

"Do you see it, Timon? The sheer genius of it?" Huy called excitedly, speaking in Punic, manipulating the counters.

"And where was Marhabal now?" Timon demanded as excitedly in the same language. After two years his Punic was fluent.

"He was here"—Huy touched the cavalry counters—"holding his horse on a short rein. Now that Hannibal has enveloped the Romans by letting them through, what does he do then?"

"The reserves?" Timon guessed.

"Yes!" Huy was hopping in excitement. "He unleashes them on the Roman's flanks, squeezing him in a vise. And what then?"

"The cavalry?"

"Ah, yes! The cavalry—Marhabal, the faithful brother, who has waited all that long day. 'Go!' cries Hannibal." Huy threw his arm in a wide gesture. "The cavalry crash into them. It is perfect timing. The right action, at the right time."

"And the result, Highborn?" Timon pleaded. "Was it victory?"

"It was. The battle of Cannae: eight Roman legions wiped out." Huy swept his hand across the box, exterminating the legions. "And that ends our study of Hannibal's campaigns."

Timon held Huy's cloak for him, and Huy fastened the clasp as he left the precincts of the temple college. Timon followed, wearing the short blue tunic of Huy's household, with a light gold chain, dagger and purse belting his waist—marks of high trust as a body slave. He walked a pace behind Huy's left shoulder, so as not to mask his sword arm. As they left the temple area the crowds spotted them. They cheered Huy, pressing to touch his arm in greeting and perhaps receive a coin from Timon's purse.

Huy loved his popularity. A successful general—there had been two other campaigns since the great slave-taking—a well-beloved

priest, a noted wit and writer of songs, and a rich philanthropist, he was an object of adulation throughout the city.

They crossed the busy marketplace with its smells of spices and hides and open sewers, and moved along the stone jetty at the lakeside. Beyond the bustle of the harbor area lay the town houses of the noble families and rich merchants, each protected by a high outer wall and a heavy carved wooden gate. Huy's new residence was here, its entrance in a narrow, walled lane.

Inside the paved central courtyard Huy handed his sword and cloak to Timon. The princes and princesses were there waiting for him, fourteen of them, and they swarmed forward to engulf him. The religious instruction of the children of house Barca was a duty Huy had imposed upon himself, and despite the continuing estrangement between king and priest, Lannon had not interfered.

One of the royal nursemaids, having watched Huy lead her charges into the house, turned toward Timon. Sellene was a tall girl with strong shoulders, long-waisted and with fruitful hips. She wore her hair oiled and dressed in the manner of the Vendi, for she was of Timon's tribe. Though taken also in the great slave raid, she was not slave born, and there was a fierce spirit in her to match his. Timon signed to her, and she followed him to his own tiny room in the slave quarters. She went to him on the pallet of reed and furs, and laid her head against his chest.

"When I hold you, then once again I am king of Vendi," he whispered. With hands that could crush a man he gently loosened her tunic. "You shall be my queen and mother of my sons."

"When shall it be?" Her voice shook with emotion.

"Soon," he promised. "I have learned all that I wanted, and now I shall be the greatest king the tribes have ever known."

"My royal lords and fair ladies." The children squealed with glee; it was one of their favorite jokes when Huy addressed them thus. "Today I have a special treat for you! This evening you will meet the oracle of Opet."

The uproar subsided swiftly, the small ones not understanding but nonetheless infected by the solemnity of their elders. The bigger children had heard of the oracle, their nurses often

frightened them into obedience with the name. Now they were about to meet this mythical creature.

When Tanith came she threw her hood back from her face and smiled at them. "I'm going to tell you a story," she said gently.

The smile eased the tension, and they edged closer to her. "It's the story of the marriage of the great god Baal to the goddess Astarte." Tanith began the tale that was the basis of the Festival of the Fruitful Earth, a ten-day festival celebrated every five years. This year of Opet 538 was the hundred and sixth such ceremony since the founding of the city. It would begin on the morrow.

Tanith held her young audience enthralled, and Huy watched her with the admiration of a besotted lover. In two years she had achieved a serenity of mind and body that befitted her role of seeress and occult adviser to a nation. No matter that her pronouncements were coached by Huy; it was she who made the delivery, and convincingly. Much of Huy's recent success stemmed from her replies to the requests for guidance from the merchants of Opet. In the same way Huy kept a hand on the rudder of the ship of state, for Lannon visited the oracle regularly.

The festival would begin with the king's visit to the oracle's shrine beside the pool of Astarte. This was why Huy had summoned Tanith. He must brief her on her replies to the king's queries. Huy knew what these would be from informers to whom he was sure Lannon had leaked the questions, fully aware that it was Huy's advice he would receive through the oracle.

For two years now Huy had been without the solace of Lannon's companionship, and the sharp edge of his loss had only grown keener. He would pester others for accounts of the banquets to which he was not invited. On the king's birthday he composed a sonnet and sent it with a gift to the palace. The gift was unacknowledged and the sonnet unsung—as far as he knew.

Huy tore himself out of the sad mood that thinking of Lannon always brought on, and looked instead at his love. Seeing her with these children, animated and childlike herself, added a new dimension to his feelings for her. If it had taken two long years to win her trust, how much longer, he wondered, to win her heart? And having won it, what then? She was dedicated to the goddess.

Tanith's story ended, and Huy shouted for the royal nursemaids. Among these Huy noticed the tall, brooding girl whose dark, unfathomable gaze always disquieted him. "Sellene," he said to her, "darkness falls. Tell Timon to carry a lamp for you to the palace gate." She acknowledged him with an inclination of the head, showing neither gratitude nor resentment.

After the children had gone they ate the evening meal, Tanith, Huy and Aina, the old priestess Huy had chosen as Tanith's chaperone; she was half blind and completely deaf.

When they were finished Huy led Tanith up the outside staircase to the roof and they sat together below the parapet on reed mats. The wind off the lake was cool, and Huy crouched over his lute, strumming softly the tune he had trained Tanith's unconscious mind to accept as the signal for hypnotic concentration. While his fingers ran over the strings he began to speak in a singsong cadence, quietly but insidiously, and Tanith, her eyes dark and unseeing, sat in the starlight and listened with an inner ear.

On the first day of the Festival of the Fruitful Earth, Lannon Hycanus went in procession to the temple of Astarte to consult the oracle. He reached the cleft in the red cliffs and passed through into the silent beauty of the grotto. Tiers of stone benches rose around the pool, and against the far wall the shrine of Astarte was built half into the rock. It contained the cells of the priestesses and the chamber of the oracle. Beyond was concealed the entrance to the city archives and beyond that again, guarded by a massive stone door, were the treasury and the tomb of the kings.

Beside the pool Lannon paused, and the priestesses came to meet him, to help him shed his garments. He stood naked while the high priestess called down the goddess's favor upon him. Then he went down the steps and immersed himself in the sacred water.

While two novices dried him and dressed him in robes of fresh linen, Huy Ben-Amon sang the praise chant to Astarte. When it ended all eyes looked up to the slab that jutted into the opening in the cavern roof. Lannon called out, "Astarte, mother of moon and earth, receive our messenger and hear our plea."

The throng about the pool lifted their hands in the sign of the

sun, and at this signal the body of the sacrifice plunged from the slab. The wail of the doomed soul echoed briefly about the cavern. Then he struck the water and was dragged swiftly down into the green depths by the weight of the chains he wore.

Lannon turned and passed into the shrine. In the oracle's audience chamber the lamps burned with an unnatural greenish light, and the incense of burning herbs was heavy on the air. The oracle sat upon the throne, a small figure completely hidden in white robes. Lannon halted, admiring for a moment the arrangements that put the questioner at such a disadvantage. Barefoot, dressed in strange robes, forced to look up at the throne while he inhaled the subtly drugged air, he must inevitably feel unsure of himself. Lannon's anger stirred as he asked the first question.

Huy watched from behind the draperies as Tanith answered in the same singsong cadence he had used. When Lannon was satisfied and turned away, her voice stopped him. "There is more."

Lannon, not accustomed to unsolicited counsel, was surprised. But Tanith continued, "The lion had a faithful jackal to warn him of the hunter's approach, but he drove the jackal away. The sun had a bird to carry the sacrifices on high, but turned his countenance away from the bird. Oh, proud lion! Oh, faithless sun!"

Huy held his breath. It had sounded very clever when he had composed it, but now, spoken aloud in the presence of the king, it shocked him. The import of the riddle struck Lannon immediately.

"Damn you, witch!" he shouted. "Must I have it from you also? That cursed priest plagues me at every turn. I cannot walk in the city but I hear the crowds sing his songs. My guests repeat his empty mouthings. My children even—" He broke off. Then, almost inaudibly, he said, "How I miss that terrible little man."

Huy doubted almost that the words had been spoken, for at once Lannon's voice rose again in a bellow. "But he defied me. He took from me that which was mine, and that I cannot overlook!" So saying, the king turned and stormed from the shrine.

On the final day of the festival Lannon Hycanus received the renewed pledges of loyalty from his subjects. At the ceremony there were representatives from each of the nine noble families,

the guilds of craftsmen and the powerful trading syndicates. As a priest made the oath of allegiance on behalf of the priesthood, Lannon growled softly, "Where is the Holy Father, Ben-Amon?"

"My lord, I speak for him and all the priests of Baal." The priest answered as Huy had said, and Lannon protested no further.

That evening Opet plunged into the orgy that ended the festival. While Lannon feasted with his nobles, the commoners thronged the streets, singing and dancing. Wine vendors passed freely among them and the wanton revels began. For that night the rules of society were suspended, and neither husbands nor wives could demand an accounting from their spouses.

Long before dark Lannon was drunk—expansive and happy, as were most of his guests. He was not aware of anything unusual until almost complete silence had descended upon the hall. He looked up, frowning as he saw Huy Ben-Amon approaching.

Huy's expression was solemn as he knelt before Lannon, and his voice rang out clearly. "My king, I come to renew my allegiance. Let all men know that my loyalty is unto death and beyond."

Lannon, his brain fuddled with wine, was caught off-balance, as Huy had intended. Before he found words, Huy had risen. "As a mark of my faith, I offer a gift."

Behind him Timon entered, came to Lannon, knelt and bowed his head. "But he belongs to the gods," the king said harshly. "You declared him god-marked, priest."

Huy steeled himself. He had explained to Baal and to Timon that it was necessary to regain the king's favor, and that this was the one way of doing so. Nevertheless, he was uneasy. He had asked Baal for permission to deny the bird-footed marking of the slave. The answer had been an ambiguous muttering of summer thunder. "My lord," Huy said, "I was mistaken. The gods have shown me signs that the markings are not sacred."

Lannon stared at him. "You mean you give him to me without reservation? I can have him dispatched immediately, if I so wish?"

"I have declared my love for the king," said Huy, as with his foot he nudged Timon.

In a great reverberating bass, Timon spoke his lines in near perfect Punic. "I come to you as living proof of that love."

Lannon rocked back on his cushions, thinking. "You seek to chain me. There are still conditions. . . ."

"No, my lord. Not chains, simply the silken threads of friendship." They held each other's eyes. Lannon had opened his mouth to reject the gift, but instead welcoming laughter burst from his lips. "Fly for me, bird of the sun!"

"Roar for me, Gry-Lion of Opet!"

Huy sat below Lannon on the cushions and was brought a bowl of wine. He drank half of it, then passed it to Lannon, who drained it and smashed the bowl on the floor. "We have wasted much time, my Sunbird. Let us make up for it. What shall we do first?"

"Drink," said Huy, choosing an activity dear to the king.

"Drink!" echoed Lannon. "More wine—send more wine!"

Huy swayed gracefully as he looked up at the night sky. "Astarte, mother of earth, your beauty is multiplied until it floods my soul." Four silver moons hung above the reveling city. He closed one eye, and three of the moons vanished; he opened it and they reappeared. "Astarte, guide your servant's footsteps."

He stumbled over a body lying in the shadows, and stooped to check for signs of life. The body snored and exhaled a fruity gust as he rolled it onto its back. It reminded Huy of the figures he had left strewn about the banquet hall—Lannon among them, smiling as he slept. Huy chuckled, tottering on toward home.

As he went, a figure slipped silently from a doorway and followed him. It was cloaked and hooded, its movements stealthy and deliberate. The lane was dark, but a lamp burned dimly above Huy's gate, left there to welcome the master home. As Huy reached for the latch, the figure flew at him. A hand closed on his wrist, and he was thrown back against the wall.

Wine had slowed his reflexes. Before he could cry out, a woman's soft lips were pressed against his. He reached for her, but immediately she was gone, slipping through the gateway and into the house. Huy raced after her. Inside the house a mocking whisper of laughter sent him charging toward his sleeping quarters. Beside the burning night lamp stood the cloaked woman, her face completely hidden within the hood.

Huy went toward her, and at that moment she stooped and snuffed the lamp flame. In the darkness he gathered himself. He was sobering fast now, and sensed soft stirrings in the air near him. He pounced quickly, his fingers brushing against smooth skin. Whoever she was, she had discarded the cloak and was as naked as a newborn baby. Like a stalking leopard he went after her, whipped an arm about her waist and carried her, kicking, to the thick pile of furs that made up his bed.

Huy woke as the soft pinks of dawn suffused his chamber. He raised himself on one elbow and looked down at the girl beside him. She opened her eyes. "Baal's blessings on you, Holy Father."

"Tanith!" He was gripped by awe and superstitious terror.

"Yes, my lord." She smiled at him.

"This is an offense against the goddess," he whispered.

"To deny my love for you would have been an offense against all nature." She sat up on the bed and kissed him without remorse.

"Love?" His misgivings were temporarily forgotten. "But my body, my back—how can you love me?"

"Your back is a part of you, of your goodness and wisdom."

He stared at her for many seconds, then took her in his arms.

In the evening Huy stood on a hilltop outside the city waiting for his god. He had spent the day poring over the sacred books, examining the roles laid down for priests, their duties to the gods and to each other. He thought he had built up a case for his behavior—he could not bring himself to call it sacrilege—and he had come now to plead that case.

As the sun shot a last golden lance over the crest of the hill he made his plea: that what was good behavior between Baal and his mate Astarte would be equally justifiable between their earthly representatives. "Great Baal and heavenly Astarte," he ended, "if I am mistaken in my reasoning then I deserve your wrath and, despite my life of faithful service, the most dire punishment." He paused. "You who have loved, take pity on one who loves also."

He came down the hill well satisfied with his plea. As he reentered the city the sky was brilliant with stars, and the night

breeze on his face was like the caress of Tanith's silky tresses. He moved through the narrow streets, hugging the warmth of his love secretly to him. "Tanith," he whispered. "Tanith."

He was passing the palace when a movement in the shadows caught his eye. Light from the lamp outside the gate shone on the handsome face of the nurse Sellene. He was about to move on when a man came toward her out of the darkness, and Huy recognized him as Timon. He and Sellene embraced, and Huy smiled tenderly in the sympathy of the lover for all other lovers.

In his room Huy took a scroll and began to write a poem to Tanith. As he wrote, Timon and Sellene were forgotten. A little after midnight he fell exhausted across his writing pallet and slept.

Rough hands shook him awake. It was Mursil, the huntmaster. "The Gry-Lion sends for you, Holiness. Two of the king's slaves have run. The king bids you join the chase."

Even in his half-wakened state Huy knew who the escaped slaves were, and he felt a sickness in his guts. He looked up at Mursil. "No," he said. "I cannot go. Tell the king I am ill."

THE moon had given Timon and Sellene good light, and they had moved fast. To the great river was a two-week journey, so, during the first hours of their escape, they were anxious to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the inevitable pursuit. They stopped once at a ford to rest and drink, then hurried on toward the north.

When the moon set, there were only the stars to light their way, and at a broken place in the path Sellene fell heavily. Timon dropped to his knees beside her. "My ankle!" she whispered.

The ankle was hot, and already swelling. With the sword he had brought, Timon cut strips from his cloak and bound the ankle as Huy had taught him. He worked in haste, dread gnawing at him. Then he lifted her to her feet. "Can you walk on it?" he asked.

She clung to him and tried a few steps, panting with pain. "I cannot. Go on without me. Leave me here."

He lowered her to the ground, then knotted their two cloaks into a sling and placed it about her body. He looped the end over his shoulders and lifted her. He started forward again.

By midmorning the sling had rubbed the skin from Timon's neck. The heat was intense, and the spring had long gone from his step. On the edge of an open glade he stopped and leaned against a tree, afraid to put the girl down lest he could not find the strength to lift her again.

"Leave me, Timon," she whispered. "This way we both will die."

Timon gestured her to silence. He held his breath and listened. She heard it then also, the distant baying of the hound pack.

"You can still escape," she urged him.

"Without you there is no escape." He carried her across the glade to an outcrop of rock and laid her gently down, then folded her cloak for a pillow and squatted beside her.

"Those who run they kill in the worst way," Sellene said. Timon stroked her cheek lightly, not answering. "Would it not be better, Timon, if you used your sword before they come?"

"If the little priest is with them, then we have a chance. He has power over the king—and there is a bond between him and me."

The dogs were closer now. He unsheathed his sword and went out among the rocks to look. Thirty sinewy hounds with the fangs of wolves were strung out across the glade. Behind them ran the handlers, and beyond them came five war elephants, with knights and slavemasters in their castles. Timon wrapped his cloak about his left forearm and settled his grip on the sword.

The leading hounds saw him among the rocks and their baying changed to excited yammering. The first rushed in at him with jaws snapping and leaped at his face. His blade took it in the base of its throat. He thrust his cloaked arm into the jaws of another and hacked at a third. But there were too many. They bore him to his knees, their teeth slashing at his back and thighs.

Then abruptly the dog handlers were whipping the pack away from him. He pulled himself to his feet. He had lost his sword, and blood streamed down his body as he looked desperately up at the war elephant which towered over him. His last hope faded as he saw that Huy Ben-Amon was not among the hunters—and that Lannon Hycanus, the Gry-Lion of Opet, was laughing.

"A good run, slave," Lannon taunted. "But it will cost you dear." He turned to one of his slavemasters. "Execute them."

Timon looked up at the king and spoke in a strong, clear voice. "I am the living proof of that love," he said.

Lannon's head jerked around as he remembered the words. He stared at the slave king. "Very well," he said. "You remind me of my duty to a friend." He nodded to the slavemaster. "But I swear you will live to curse the moment you spoke those words. You will be sent to the gold mines at Hulya, chained with a weight of two talents." Almost a hundredweight of chains to be carried night and day. "We will take the woman back with us also. Let her be chained to one of the elephants and marched."

Timon stepped forward. "My lord, she cannot walk. She—"

"She will walk," said Lannon, "or she will be dragged. You may ride upon the elephant and encourage her."

Huy filled a wine bowl from one of his choice amphoras, one that he had set aside for a rare occasion. He was humming softly to himself, and there was a small smile that came and went upon his lips and made his dark eyes sparkle. For the first time since the dreadful day when Sellene's mutilated corpse had been dragged into the city behind the elephant, he could think of something other than that and the sight of Timon bowed beneath chains, his eyes turned toward Huy and his wrists lifted in a gesture of menace or appeal—Huy could not tell which.

Now at last he had been able to dismiss the scene from his mind. Today his whole being was taken up with thoughts of his love. He had dressed in his best linen, and had sent a slave for Tanith.

Pursing his lips thoughtfully, he let four drops of a clear liquid drip from a glass vial into the wine. He stirred the wine with his forefinger, then sucked his finger thoughtfully, wrinkling his nose at the faintly musty taste of the opiate. He added a little wild honey to mask it and, satisfied, set the bowl on a wooden stool beside the pile of cushions. Then he picked up his lute and climbed the staircase to the parapet to watch the narrow lane.

He caught his breath when two figures in hooded robes turned into the lane. As one figure hurried ahead, the other called out in an ancient voice, "My lady, slower! I pray you."

Huy grinned. A slave opened the gate, and as they crossed the

courtyard Huy struck a note on his lute. Tanith stopped dead. The old chaperone, unhearing, entered the house, still muttering.

Huy started to sing. It was a poem he had written to Tanith, and as the last sweet note fell on the evening air Tanith lifted the hood from her face and looked up at him. Huy went down into the courtyard and guided her gently toward the house.

The old priestess was seated on the cushions already, mumbling bitterly about her pains and aches. Huy took the prepared wine bowl in both hands. "Is she strong?" he asked Tanith.

"As strong as most men. Why do you ask?"

"I have placed drops in her wine. But I do not want her sleep to be eternal. Four drops should be sufficient."

He handed the old woman the bowl and her wrinkled face split into a toothless grin. "You have a kind heart, Holiness."

They seated themselves in front of her, and while they talked they watched her. She was sipping the wine, drawing out her pleasure. But at last the empty bowl slipped from her fingers and she let out a contented snore and bowed forward on the cushions.

Then Huy and Tanith embraced, coming together ardently.

Over the months that followed, Tanith's chaperone developed a particular taste for Huy's wine. At temple feasts she was wont to extol its quality, and always with a word of praise for the Holy Father himself. "A dear, dear man," she would tell the sisters. And she would smile fondly.

LANNON HYCANUS was pleased, but trying not to make it obvious. He stood by the window and looked toward the harbor, where five galleys were unloading. In the room behind him Rib-Addi was reading aloud in his prim voice. "Into Opet this day from the southern plains, fifty-eight tusks of ivory, in all sixty-nine talents."

"You attended the weighing?" Lannon demanded.

"As always, my lord."

Lannon grunted, and when Rib-Addi resumed his reading the king found his attention wandering, picking at stray thoughts. He thought of Huy, and felt a cold breeze ruffle the surface of his contentment. There was a flaw in their friendship. Huy had changed toward him, and Lannon searched for the reason. Not

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the aftermath of their long estrangement. Something else. The high priest was withdrawn, secretive.

Lannon frowned. A part of his mind had heard what Rib-Addi was saying. "What's that? A drop in the gold yield from Hulya?"

"My lord, there was a heavy fall of rock in the southern end of the mine." It never ceased to amaze Rib-Addi that from a mass of figures the king would instantly pounce on a tiny decrease in output from one of the dozens of small mines.

Lannon ordered the Hulya overseer replaced. "I will not have carelessness—gold lost, valuable slaves wasted."

As Rib-Addi took down the order, Lannon's thoughts returned to Huy and how his presence provided the zest that made each triumph more precious, each disaster easier to surmount. The king admitted to himself that Huy was the only human being he could call a friend. As Gry-Lion he was isolated from all others.

I need him, Lannon thought, far more than he needs me. I will destroy anything that comes between us.

He thought of Huy's current absence. Was it truly necessary that the high priest should travel four hundred miles, taking two cohorts of his legion and the oracle of Opet, to consecrate some minor shrine in the northern kingdom? Or was Huy leaving Opet for some devious reason of his own?

The clash of armored feet interrupted these speculations. One of his high-ranking officers burst into the room, bringing with him a centurion in dusty cloak and armor. "My lord, news of the worst kind. A slave rising at Hulya. This man has seen it."

Lannon turned to the weary centurion. "Speak!"

"I was on patrol, Majesty, on a sweep to the north. We saw the smoke, but by the time we reached the mine it was too late. They had opened the compounds, slaughtered the garrison." He paused, remembering comrades with their bowels ripped open. "They were gone, but for a short time we followed them northward. They moved slowly, plundering and burning as they went."

"How many of them? How many?"

"Five thousand from Hulya, but they have opened a dozen other mines, and the field slaves have flocked to join them."

The senior officer hazarded, "There must be thirty thousand."

"Thirty thousand," whispered Lannon. "In Baal's holy name, what force have we to oppose them?"

"There are two legions at Zeng," the senior officer answered. "Another here at Opet. Two more along the great river."

"All too far," Lannon growled. "What other force have we?"

"There is His Holiness," the centurion murmured, "with two cohorts at Sinal."

"Twelve hundred men against thirty thousand," said the senior officer. "It would be folly to try odds like that—and, my lord, Ben-Amon is no fool. He will not fight."

Lannon smiled. "Content yourself. Ben-Amon will fight. At a time and a place of his own choosing. I will march to support him. Issue mobilization orders to all the disbanded legions."

"WILL there be a battle?" Tanith asked. Her green eyes sparkled with anticipation. "Like the ones you sing about?"

Huy merely grunted. He was writing to the garrison commander at Sett: "What fords are passable? I will join you in six days. I intend to dispute the enemy's passage of the river at . . ."

Tanith slipped up behind Huy. "My lord—"

"Please, Tanith. I am busy on most urgent matters."

"No more urgent than a reply to me. Will there be a battle?"

"Yes," Huy replied testily. "Yes, there will. You are going home to Opet until it is over."

Tanith glared at the back of his head. All day she had been caught up by tales of rape and slaughter brought in by refugees. A vast slave army was trundling down upon them, outnumbering Huy Ben-Amon and his band by at least twenty to one. It was the stuff of legends, and Tanith would not miss a moment of it.

That night she slipped into Huy's tent, where he lay in darkness on his couch. She was shivering violently.

"What is it, my heart?" Huy was alarmed.

"Oh, my lord, a dream. A dream of ill omen." She wrapped her arms about his neck. "I walked upon a night field lit only by the funeral fires." Huy held her close—ill omens indeed. "I was weeping, my lord. I came upon the standard of the sixth legion, the sunbird, broken and discarded in the dirt. Then Astarte was with

me, chiding me that this would never have happened if I had stayed with you."

Huy felt a quick stab of doubt. It seemed a little too neat. He knew well what happened when Tanith set her heart on something. "Tanith," he said severely, studying her face, "you know your sacred duty as a seeress, and how grave a matter it is to misrepresent the words of the gods."

Tanith nodded fervently. "I know it well, Holy Father." Unable to withstand his scrutiny a moment longer, she buried her face in his neck and waited silently, not without a spasm of pleasure at paying Huy in his own coin. She had seen him often enough use his sacred duty for his own ends.

"Very well," he said gruffly. "I will keep you with me." And Tanith smiled triumphantly into Huy Ben-Amon's curly beard.

For five days Huy tested the moving mass of humanity as it flowed toward the great river, always retreating ahead of it, using his tiny force with economy and purpose. On the fifth day he linked up with the garrison at Sett. Mago, the elderly commander, placed himself under Huy with eighteen hundred archers and light infantry, twelve war elephants, two patrol galleys of a hundred oars each, and the garrison's considerable arsenal.

From the town walls Huy and Mago could see the slave army moving toward the ford. "They will cross here tomorrow," Huy said, "and tomorrow I will destroy them." Mago glanced sideways at him. Destroy seemed a strange word coming from a general with three thousand men facing an army of thirty thousand.

Seeing the older man's expression, Huy took his arm. "A bowl of wine," he suggested. "This waiting is thirsty work."

Huy and his officers dined with Mago that night, and afterward Huy spoke of the impending battle, warning his officers not to judge the enemy too lightly. "I almost paid dearly for that mistake," he told them. "Two days ago I was tempted to probe their center in strength, and I found it as soft as freshly kneaded dough. But, praise unto Baal, before I ordered a full frontal attack I was warned by an impulse from the gods. I looked to the enemy flanks, which overlapped mine, and I saw how firmly they stood. Sud-

denly I remembered Cannae, how Hannibal had enmeshed the Romans—"

Huy broke off, revelation dawning on his face.

"Cannae! Hannibal!" The clay game box, his own voice lecturing, Timon intent and listening. . . . Timon had been sent to the Hulya mine. And who else could have organized a slave rabble into an army? "It's Timon!" he said. "It must be!"

With loving attention Tanith braided Huy's beard, and then twisted it up under his chin where it would not catch in his breastplate or afford a grip for a desperate enemy. She knelt to buckle the straps of his greaves, fussed with the folds of his cloak. Although she smiled, he could hear the fear in her murmured endearments. He kissed her. "My lord," she whispered. "My love."

When at last she drew away, she took up the vulture axe and lifted its blade to her lips. "Fail him not!" she prayed.

In the predawn darkness the officers ate their morning meal on the ramparts of the fort. When Huy joined them they greeted him with boisterous high spirits. They could see where the slave army was encamped upstream.

Huy stared at the heavy mist on the river. "A curse upon it. I cannot see if they have strung their lines across the ford yet."

"Shall I order a galley upstream to investigate?" Mago asked.

"No. We'll know soon enough. And I don't want to draw attention to the galleys." He poured a bowl of hot wine and raised it to the company. "A bright edge to your swords!" he said quietly.

As the sun came up over a smoky horizon Huy sang the greeting to Baal and drew the attention of the gods to the fact that he would need their assistance if the day was to be carried. Then he turned briskly to his staff. "Very well, you know your stations."

He took Mago aside. "You have a man to attend the priestess?"

Mago beckoned to a grizzled old infantryman.

The man came forward and said, "I will remain with the priestess. Should it seem that she might fall into enemy hands, I will—"

"Good," Huy interrupted him. "If the stroke is necessary, make it swift and sure." He went away, down to a small boat that rowed him out to the larger of the galleys. There he watched and waited.

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THE SUN HAD DISPERSED the mist and the slave army was fully committed to its crossing. Twenty lines had been strung from the south bank of the great river to an island in midstream, and now they were laying the lines from there to the north bank. Already there were fifteen or twenty thousand slaves in the water. Huy watched as the first of them emerged onto the island. There was still the north channel between them and safety. Meanwhile the party on the south bank was dwindling to a size which would soon be a fair match for Mago's impatient warriors.

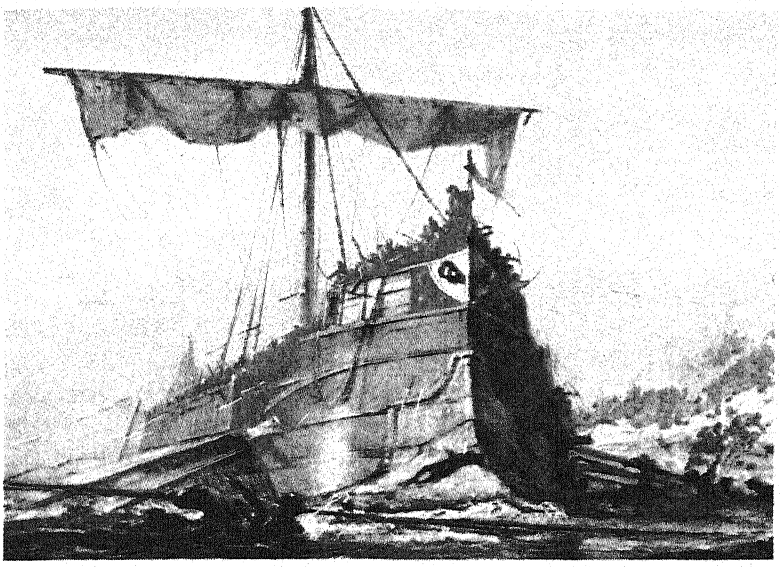
As the first slaves began filing off the island toward the north bank Huy had a difficult choice to make. If he delayed his attack much longer, many would escape into the dense northern forests. But if he struck now it would commit Mago against vastly superior forces. At last he turned to the captain of the galley.

"Hoist the golden battle standard!" he commanded. The battle signal was repeated on the other galley anchored on the starboard beam. The anchor cables were severed, the wide wings of oars were spread, and the galleys arrowed upstream on courses that would carry one through each channel of the river.

"Steer for the center of their line," Huy ordered his captain, and they raced down on the crowded ropes, strung with the heads of struggling men like black pearls. Above the rush of water and the creak of oars, Huy heard a mounting hubbub of terror. The galley cut into the heavily laden ropes; the current swept the lines of slaves into deep water to be picked off by Huy's archers.

Huy ran to the stern and looked back. The river was filled with drowned and drowning men. The island was hidden by a solid blanket of shivering survivors, others still trying to find a foothold on it. There were so many of them that they reminded Huy of ants rather than human beings. He held that thought as he steeled himself to give the next order.

The galley captain was watching him expectantly. "Very well, Captain," Huy said. Both ships swung broadside to the current. Then, from their bows, Baal's fire squirted. It spread smoothly on the river, the sunlight breaking into rainbows on the floating liquid, its stink oily and rank. Then magically it burst into flame, and the heat was so intense that Huy drew back.



"In Baal's holy name," he whispered, as the roaring orange flame swept downstream, filled the great river from bank to bank. It flowed over the crowded island, and when it had passed the blackened bodies lay in smoldering heaps. At that instant he heard a clash of weapons and swung about to see Mago's force crashing into the rear of the slave army still on the south bank. There, Huy knew, was where Timon must be.

Now the galleys stole in toward the bank, and from high perches the archers loosed their arrows into the enemy. Soon the greenish color of the water changed to bright scarlet. "A river of blood, Holiness," the galley captain remarked.

Huy nodded. He could see that the battle had reached a point of equilibrium. The pressure that Mago's cohorts could exert was insufficient to drive the enemy back another yard, and his axemen were tiring. Huy paced the deck anxiously, knowing what should be done. "The elephants, Mago. Now!" he pleaded.

Then he grunted in relief as Mago charged his war elephants into Timon's army. Trumpeting and squealing, the huge animals waded through living bodies, crushing them underfoot, lifting men

in their trunks and flinging them toward the sky. "Now!" shouted Huy, and the galleys ran aground together on the bank, and from them poured four hundred axemen led by Huy Ben-Amon.

"For Baal!" The ground beneath them turned to red mud as they reaped the bloody harvest. In the midst of it Huy saw Timon. "Timon!" he shouted. "A challenge! Fight me!"

In reply Timon hurled his spear. Huy ducked, and the blade buried itself in the neck of the man behind him. Unarmed now, Timon strode to the riverbank, leaped into the bloodied water and struck out toward the island.

Huy at once tore off his armor. Naked except for the belt which held his axe, he looked out across the river. Timon was already halfway to the island. Huy dived cleanly from the bank and began swimming.

On the island Timon had found weapons—spearheads near the charred bodies on the ground. As Huy waded ashore Timon hurled the first of them. Huy deflected it with his axe, swatting it out of the air as though it were an insect. Again Timon threw, and again; but each point was sent spinning aside. Then Huy charged him; in desperation Timon picked up a river boulder as large as a man's head. It caught Huy on his shoulder, knocking him down, and the axe skidded away from his hand.

Now Timon charged, made careless by his anger and hatred. Huy leaped forward and up like a thrown javelin, the top of his head crashing into Timon's body just beneath the rib cage. As Timon dropped to his knees Huy struck him with his fist below the ear. The huge man toppled forward, senseless, to the rocks.

"I CANNOT kill you, Timon." Huy's voice came to him through gray mist, and from a great distance. "Though you deserve death, I have made an oath to my gods."

Huy's face came into focus, and Timon found himself pegged down to the earth with leather thongs, his arms outstretched. He rolled his head enough to see that he was on the north side of the island, hidden from any watchers, and alone with Huy. On the rocks beside him a small fire burned, heating a broad spearhead.

"Soon my men will come to find me, and then you will be

taken out of my hands," Huy said. "I made a mistake with you. No man can ever tame the wild leopard. You were always Manatassi, never Timon. The bond between us was an illusion. Your destiny is to seek the destruction of all I hold dear. My destiny is to protect it." Huy paused, and there was true regret in his heart as he went on. "I cannot kill you, but I owe it to my king and my people to make sure you never carry the sword against us again."

The vulture axe sang in the air. Timon screamed once, then whimpered softly as his severed right hand twitched and trembled like a dying animal on the scorched earth of the island.

Huy fetched the heated spear blade from the fire and sealed off the pumping blood vessels of the stump. Then he cut the thongs that still bound Timon. "Go," he said, "before my men come. Go. You must trust yourself to the river."

Huy found Tanith in her chamber, her face pale, dark smears beneath her eyes. "My heart burned within me, my lord, but it was only when they told me you were safe that I cried."

He held her close. "And was it glorious and heroic?" he asked.

"It was horrible, my lord, beyond any dreams of horror. You poets never tell of the blood, the screaming. . . . Holy Father, you who are so gentle, how could you do what was done today?"

Huy pondered. "It was my duty," he said at last. "The law is death to rebel slaves."

"The law is wrong then."

"Never. Laws are all we have that save us from the void."

"Then the laws should be changed."

"Ah!" Huy smiled. "But until they are changed, obey them."

The next morning Lannon Hycanus arrived with two full legions and fifty elephants of war.

"I fear I have been greedy, sire," Huy told him. "I have left you not a one." Lannon shouted with laughter and embraced him.

That night Huy composed a ballad to commemorate the battle. Lannon wept at the singing of it and Huy wept with him. When it was done, Lannon stood. "I will not have such beauty recorded on the skins of mere beasts," he cried. "I will have a scroll made

DAGNCU

of finest gold. Then, my Sunbird, your songs will live forever."

Huy stopped weeping, the artist in him aroused, well aware that this was an offer Lannon might not remember in the morning. "I am truly honored, my lord." He knelt by his king. "Will you sign the treasury order now?"

"Write it this instant and I will sign it."

Afterward king and priest got very drunk together.

A GORGE split the mountains, so deep that the path was dark and moss-covered, slippery underfoot. A fall of silver spray plunged down from the cliffs above, driven by the wind as a fine cold mist into Manatassi's face as he climbed. The stump of his right arm ached cruelly, but he pushed on. High above him, standing on a giant boulder which all but blocked the gorge, the figure of a man was outlined. Others appeared at easily defended places on the trail and silently watched Manatassi climb.

As he came to the boulder he saw that the man who stood there was a captain of one of his old regiments. He stopped and let his cloak fall back. The man did not recognize his king in this face which pain and humiliation had remolded.

Am I so altered? Manatassi thought grimly. Will no man know me? He and the man stared at each other for many seconds until Manatassi spoke. "I seek Zingala, the ironsmith."

In the few days he had been back in Vendi territory, Manatassi had learned that he had been succeeded as king by his half-brother, Khani, who had murdered most of Manatassi's councillors and war captains. Others, like Zingala, had fled and were now outcasts in these hills. The man pointed on up the gorge, and Manatassi went forward. When he came out upon the summit of the gorge, armed and silent men fell in on either side of him. Together they went toward the smoke of Zingala's smelting fires.

The old ironmaster was packing ore into the belly of one of his furnaces. He straightened as the tall stranger and his escort approached. Zingala frowned—there was something familiar in the man's walk. Then the stranger was close, staring into his face. Those eyes! Instinctively Zingala looked down at the stranger's feet. Then he dropped onto his face upon the earth.

"Command me!" he cried. "Command me, Manatassi, great black beast, thunder of the heavens!"

At Manatassi's command Zingala forged a lion's paw with five massive iron claws. He filed and polished it, then reheated it and tempered it in the blood of a leopard. A skilled leatherworker fashioned a socket for the claw out of elephant hide and shaped it to fit Manatassi's stump. It made a fearsome artificial limb.

The usurper Khani was with one of his women when the iron claw tore the top off his skull.

IN THE first year Manatassi made treaties with three neighboring tribes and conquered another in a single devastating battle. Instead of massacring the menfolk, as was the custom, Manatassi had only the royal family strangled. Then he assembled the defeated regiments, and they thundered their oath of allegiance to him. In the second year he marched westward to the coast and by the same means acquired a hundred thousand more warriors.

Only once did his lieutenants see him show emotion. They knew that he seldom slept. It seemed there was some driving force within him that denied him rest or pleasure. Then, once, when they stood together upon the tall dunes at the western limit of the land, a galley of Opet sped out of the mist, her oars beating rhythmically. One of the war captains pointed across the water.

Manatassi was apart from them, draped in the leopard skin of royalty, the blue heron's feathers of his headdress fluttering in the breeze that came off the sea. The men of Vendi saw their king's face drip with sweat, his jaws clench as he ground his teeth with a sound like rock on rock. The war captain ran to him, thinking him stricken. "Highness—" he began. Manatassi turned upon him in raging madness and slashed his face with the iron claw.

"There!" he screamed, pointing with his claw at the disappearing galley. "There is your enemy. Mark him well!"

IT DID not seem five years since Huy and Tanith had become lovers. Yet it was so, for the Festival of the Fruitful Earth had almost come around once more. Huy smiled at his memories of the last festival and what it had brought. It was four days now since

he had last seen Tanith, four days since he had come to these islands on the lake to fish with Lannon.

Huy was in the stern of the skiff, poling it smoothly over the lake, back to the island and their camp. The days had been happy, free from the cares of state. As they rounded the point of the island they saw a galley lying at anchor in the bay. The royal standard of house Barca stood at her masthead.

"The world has found us out, Huy." Minutes before, they had been laughing together like children; now Lannon's voice was tired. "You are good for me, old friend. Don't ever desert me."

Huy flushed, clumsy in his embarrassment. "Nay, Majesty," he answered huskily, "I will be with you always."

In the stern cabin of the galley, their faces lit unnaturally from the lantern swinging from its roof, they listened grimly to the news. Unrest along the northern borders, movements of large bodies of men seen at a distance, spies reporting rumors of a strange new god with the claws of a lion who would lead the tribes to a land of grass and water. Tension stirring, secret affairs afoot.

Lannon was silent for a while. Then he turned to Habbakuk Lal.

"Can you take us on a night run to Opet?" he asked. The admiral smiled and nodded.

Lannon and Huy stood at the stern rail and watched their island fade into the darkness. "I feel I am leaving something behind here," Lannon said softly. "Do you feel it also, Huy?"

"Perhaps it is our youth. Perhaps these last few days were the end of it." They were silent then, swaying to the motion of the galley under oars. When the island was gone Lannon spoke again.

"I am sending you to the border, Huy. Be my eyes and ears."

"It is not for long, my heart," Huy apologized. Tanith seemed fully engaged in devouring a bunch of purple grapes. "There is nobody else the king can trust on this mission," Huy added.

"I am sure," Tanith murmured. She licked her fingers. "Just as there was no other who could go with him to stick fish."

"Lannon and I have been companions since our childhood, my dear. We used to go out to the islands often in our youth. It was like a pilgrimage. Besides, it was but five days."

"But five days!" Tanith mimicked him. "I swear I do not understand you. You profess your great love for me, yet when Lannon Hycanus crooks a finger you run to him like a puppy and roll on your back that he may tickle your belly."

"Tanith!" Huy began to grin. "You are jealous!"

"Jealous, is it!" Tanith leaped up off the couch, and stood cradling her belly, puffing it out. "Do you see aught different about me, Holy Father?"

"You eat too much," Huy told her. "You are getting fat."

Tanith shook her head. "This is not food, Holy Father."

Huy stared at her, stunned. He knew now what she meant, and that something would have to be done. His mind instantly rejected the grisly old hags on the waterfront whose job it was to rectify such blunders. Perhaps instead he could arrange for some new shrine to be consecrated in a remote area and there, away from prying eyes, she could bear his son. It would be simple enough to find a foster mother he could trust. They could go there often to be with their son. Suddenly he could imagine the happiness of it, see his son kicking and gurgling in the sunlight.

Tanith came to embrace him. "Are you angry with me, my lord?"

"No," said Huy, "I am very pleased with you."

Much later, Huy felt her tears warm and wet upon his neck. She made one last appeal. "Is it not possible for me to go with you to the north?"

Huy held her, stroking her hair, and his chest felt swollen with the strength of his love for her. He was close to tears. "No. I go fast and hard—and you must think of the child."

MARMON was commander of the legions and forts that guarded the northern border. He was an old friend of Huy's though thirty years his senior. On the day of Huy's arrival the two men ate the evening meal together, sitting up on the ramparts for the sake of the cool breeze. They discussed the situation, poring over a clay-box map so that Huy could see where the pieces of the puzzle fitted. "I am building up a system of spies upon whom I can rely," Marmon told him. "My most reliable informant is a man named Storch, a Vendi and an ex-slave. He is in my quarters now."

Storch was a tall man, with the willowy grace of so many Vendi. The skin of his shoulders was marred by the thickened scars of the slave lash. He noticed Huy's glance and adjusted his cloak to cover them. It seemed to Huy that there was a flash of defiance in his eyes.

The spy looked at Huy for a moment before he addressed Marmon. "It was our agreement that no other should see my face."

"But this is Huy Ben-Amon, high priest of Opet and general to the king."

The spy's face showed no expression, but he nodded. They talked for an hour, then Huy turned to Marmon. "This disagrees with much that you have told me. This man has heard nothing of a god with lion's claws."

"Those reports come from farther to the east," Marmon said.

"I will move eastward then," Huy announced. "At dawn."

"I will have an escort waiting for you."

"No. I will draw less attention if I travel alone. If this man is as reliable as you say, then he can be my guide."

When Storch was gone Huy asked, "How much do you pay him?"

"Very little," Marmon said. "Salt, beads, copper ornaments."

"I wonder why he does it," said Huy softly. "Why he works for us when the scars of the lash are upon his body."

"I am no longer amazed by the acts of men," said Marmon. "I have seen too much strange behavior to question motives."

Huy's efforts to find out more about the spy over the next few days' traveling met with small success. Storch was a silent man, speaking only when he was questioned and never looking directly at Huy. Moreover, from two of the forts upon the south bank Huy gleaned much firsthand information which contradicted Storch's assurances of stable conditions beyond the river.

On the fourth day the two reached the summit of a small hillock. Before them the river made a loop toward the south, then twisted back. To go around the loop would be a twenty-five-mile walk, Huy estimated. Across the neck it was less than five.

"Storch," Huy said, "do we have to walk all the way around, or is it safe to cross the river? Are there men of the tribes here?"

The spy looked away under Huy's scrutiny. "I will find out," he said. "Wait here for me."

He returned an hour before dark and led Huy down to the riverbank. Hidden in the reeds was a dugout canoe, rotten, with a stink of old fish. Huy's suspicion flared. "Where did you find this?"

"There are fishermen camped downstream."

"Vendi?"

"No. Other men."

"You told them about me?"

"No."

Huy peered into Storch's eyes. "No," he said at last. "We will go around the long way." It was a test. Would Storch try to persuade him to make the crossing?

"As you say." Storch began to cover the canoe with reeds.

"Very well." Huy made up his mind. "Take me across."

On the other side Storch hid the canoe, then led Huy up the bank and into a glade of waist-deep swamp grass. In the center of the glade he stopped abruptly, cocked his head and motioned Huy to stand still. They waited, frozen, for a long time; at last Storch moved forward again, about a hundred paces. Then he looked back at Huy, and on his face showed a bright burst of triumph as he shouted, "There he is! Take him! Take him!"

From the deep grass then rose rank upon rank of Vendi warriors, forming concentric circles about their prey, closing in on Huy. There was no escape. The high priest raised the vulture axe. "For Baal!" he shouted, and charged into the mass of warriors.

As was the custom on the first day of the Festival of the Fruitful Earth, Lannon visited the shrine beside the pool of Astarte. Now, as he looked up at the oracle, sitting on her throne, he remembered how often this witch had thwarted and unsettled him. He detested these sessions. He began his questions, his royal arrogance heightened by bad temper.

Tanith was frightened. Usually she had Huy behind the curtains for comfort, but today she was alone—and sick. The night had been hot and airless, and the child in her womb had felt heavy as stone. She had arisen listlessly to force down her morning

meal, only to vomit it all up again. Now she felt herself stifling.

The king strode back and forth, growling questions. She was unprepared, her answers empty words given without conviction.

The king stopped with one foot on the throne steps, mockery in his voice. "Come, oh seer of the future! It is a simple question. Answer it."

Tanith floundered for words. Another wave of nausea washed over her and blackness closed in. There was a roaring in her ears, then someone spoke. Tanith was shocked to realize that the husky, low-pitched voice was issuing from her own throat. "Lannon Hycanus, last Gry-Lion of Opet, question not the future. The future for you is darkness and death."

She saw her own shock repeated on Lannon's face, saw the color leave his cheeks. He held up both hands in the sun sign, trying to avert her words that struck his soul like war arrows.

"Lannon Hycanus, your gods fly upward and leave you to blackness." Lannon retreated, hands raised to shield his face, but her words sought him out. "Know then that the future lies in wait for you as the lion awaits the unwary traveler."

The king's terror exploded into violence. "Evil!" he screamed, bounding up the steps to her throne. "Witchcraft!" He struck Tanith in the face, so that her hood fell back and her hair tumbled loose. "Sorceress!" he hissed, flinging her down the steps. She fell heavily, and his first kick caught her in the belly. She doubled up. Lannon looked wildly about for a weapon to destroy the woman and the words she had spoken.

Suddenly the chamber was filled with priestesses, and he drew back, panting heavily, his pale eyes bright with madness.

"Majesty!" The reverend mother came forward. Lannon's madness faded. He turned and strode out, leaving Tanith whimpering upon the floor.

THE divine council of Astarte met that evening in the reverend mother's chamber. When summoned, Aina helped Tanith in, both of them hobbling, one with age and the other with pain. The ancient priestess mumbled comfort to the injured girl. Tanith's face was swollen, the bruises purple and livid.

"The child is hurt," Aina screeched at the council. "Let her sit."

"Nobody sits before the council," said the high priestess. "Go! Leave the girl with us."

Aina shuffled out, leaving Tanith alone before the council. The girl stayed upright only by great effort, for her senses swam on waves of pain. She could make little of the questions with which they pelted her. The reverend mother feared that Tanith had endangered the sisterhood by antagonizing the king. She kept coming back to the question, "What was it that you told him?"

"I cannot remember, Reverend Mother. They were not my words."

"Whose then? Whose if not your own? The goddess's?"

"I do not know." Tanith gasped as agony squeezed her belly.

"Do you speak with the voice of the goddess?"

"Oh, please!" whispered Tanith, bowing forward, both hands pressed to her stomach. "Oh, please . . ."

The council, watching her, saw a flood of dark red liquid drench her tunic skirts. Tanith folded and fell forward.

"I WILL not answer." Tanith had been ill for two days, and was still very weak. "I will not tell you his name."

"Child," said the reverend mother, "your life is at stake."

"You have taken life from me already. Have done then. Take it all." Tanith looked from her to Lannon Hycanus, who stood by the casement. "Nothing I say will alter your intention. I will cherish the name, so dear to me, of my child's father."

"You are being stupid and stubborn," said the reverend mother. "You know we will find out in the end."

"Enough," snapped Lannon. "I have no more time to waste." He looked at the reverend mother. "Bring the witch's chaperone."

When Aina stood blinking before the king he looked at her without anger. "You had duties you did not discharge. Name the bull who mounted the goddess's heifer."

Aina pleaded her ignorance, going down on creaking knees before the king. Lannon pushed her away irritably. "Break her arms first," he ordered. "And let the witch stand close by to watch."

Aina was dragged to her feet. "Wait!" cried Tanith. "Let her go!"

Lannon smiled. "Release her," he ordered.

Tenderly, Tanith led the old priestess out. Then she returned to the king. "I will tell you his name," she said, "but you alone."

"Leave us," commanded Lannon, and the council filed out. When they were alone Tanith said the name of Huy Ben-Amon proudly, defiantly. She saw Lannon reel as from a physical blow.

"How long has he been your lover?" he asked at last.

"Five years," she answered.

"So," he said, seeing the answers to many questions. "So it seems we shared his love then."

"Nay, Majesty." Tanith shook her head. "I had all of it."

"You are wise to speak of it as past."

"How will you kill a priestess of Astarte, Majesty? Poison or the secret dagger? Have you forgotten I belong to the goddess?"

"I have not," said Lannon. "You will go as Opet's messenger, on the tenth day of the Festival of the Fruitful Earth."

"Huy will not allow it," she whispered in horror.

"The high priest is in the north. Today is already the fourth day of the festival."

"He will hate you for it. You will lose him forever."

Lannon shook his head. "He will never know that I ordered it, or that you betrayed him." He smiled then, a cold and golden smile. "No, it is you who will lose him, and I who will have him. My need, you see, is more important than yours."

HE HAD been borne in a litter while he was unconscious, so he did not know where they traveled. Then, when he was forced to walk, his escorts blindfolded him. In the fight he had been badly bruised, but had taken no serious wound. The Vendi had avoided killing him, though the vulture axe had taken a cruel toll before they overwhelmed him.

Eventually a halt was called. A blade sawed through Huy's bonds. Then the blindfold was lifted, and he blinked in the bright sunlight.

They were in the middle of a wide plain rimmed with low hills. Except for a circle a hundred paces across, at the center of which Huy now stood, the land was black with warriors. He could not

begin to reckon their numbers. Most nightmarish was their stillness: only the feathers of their headdresses stirred in the sluggish noonday air. Storch waited nearby, with the vulture axe on his shoulder, watching a group of Vendi war captains who stood about a low mound of earth. The mound was bare, but compelled the attention like an empty stage.

Then suddenly the multitude stirred and sighed as a man in leopard-skin robes and a crown of heron's feathers stepped up onto the mound. He stood as still as a tall tree while the royal salute shook the earth and sky.

Storch laid the vulture axe at Manatassi's feet, and the king's gaze focused on Huy. Trying not to limp, Huy approached the mound and looked up at Manatassi.

"You should have killed me," said Manatassi in Punic. From his robes he lifted the iron claw. "Instead of arming me with this."

"Your life was not mine to take. I had made an oath."

"Still a man who lives by his word." Manatassi spoke without mockery. He pointed at the massed ranks of his army. "You see what a spear I have forged? Who can stand against me?"

"Many will try."

"You amongst them?"

Huy smiled. "I do not think I will have the chance."

Manatassi looked down at the hunchback, beaten but not humbled. "I have waited for you because I knew you would come. And I have need of you. March with me against Opet and its monstrous cruelties and terrible gods. With your learning and humanity at my side I will rule the world."

"I cannot do that."

"By refusing me, you know that you choose death?"

"I do."

"I thought you were a man of reason."

"Reason can carry a man just so far," Huy said, "and then he must trust to his heart."

Manatassi sighed. "You spared me; I shall spare you. Go back and tell your king that Manatassi marches out of the north to destroy him. Tell him of this army. Let it chill him. Tell him I will leave no memory of him to taint this land." He handed the vulture

axe to Huy. "Go now! All debts between us have been paid. When I meet you again I shall kill you."

Huy turned and limped away down the corridor of warriors that opened for him, and no man barred his way.

DURING the night after the ninth day of the festival, Tanith woke in her cell with gentle hands shaking her. "Child! Child, the holy father has come!" Aina told her jubilantly. "They say he ran from the border to Opet in three days."

"Oh, Aina." Tanith hugged the old priestess. "Somehow he must have heard." She was laughing excitedly. "Where is he now?"

"He went straight to the palace."

"To use his influence with the king—oh, praise the goddess. Do you think he will succeed? With him to live for, I cannot die."

"Huy Ben-Amon could make Baal himself change his mind."

"Oh, I am so happy, old mother." Tanith clung to Aina.

THE king's first thought when Huy arrived unheralded in the night was to refuse to see him. But Huy barged past the guards, gasping, "Forgive me, Majesty. I carry dreadful tidings."

Seeing Huy's wild eyes in their bruised and sunken sockets, his dusty tunic and unkempt hair, Lannon went quickly to the priest and steadied him with a brotherly arm. "What is it, Huy?"

When he had heard Huy's report, Lannon summoned the Council of Nine. He signed the necessary war orders and sent the council away again, saying, "We will meet after the final ceremony of the festival. See to your arms and take leave of your families."

To Huy he spoke kindly when they were alone. "Sleep here."

But Huy was already asleep, slumped forward on the table. Lannon carried him like a slumbering child into a guest chamber. The sacrifice would take place in a very few hours, and he knew that Huy was in the kind of death sleep that might last for days. He left him, and went to bathe and dress for the procession.

LANNON was conscious of the need to carry through the final ritual of the festival meticulously. He faced a crisis of vast proportions; he must placate the angry gods. There was no mistaking

his sincerity in the temple as he made his pledge to Astarte. He was happy to have chosen such an important messenger for the goddess. His own petty motives no longer counted. Surely for such a gift Astarte would spread her wings over Opet in this time of trial and danger.

The reverend mother placed about his neck a garland of crimson lilies. It was the moment when the praise of the goddess must be sung, and then the offertory.

Then, in the praise song, an unmistakable voice rang out. Lannon turned and gaped as Huy paced slowly across the cavern toward him. By the time the song ended Huy stood close beside the king, looking up at him with warm and loyal affection.

"Huy! Why are you here? I left you resting."

"At this time my place is here with you."

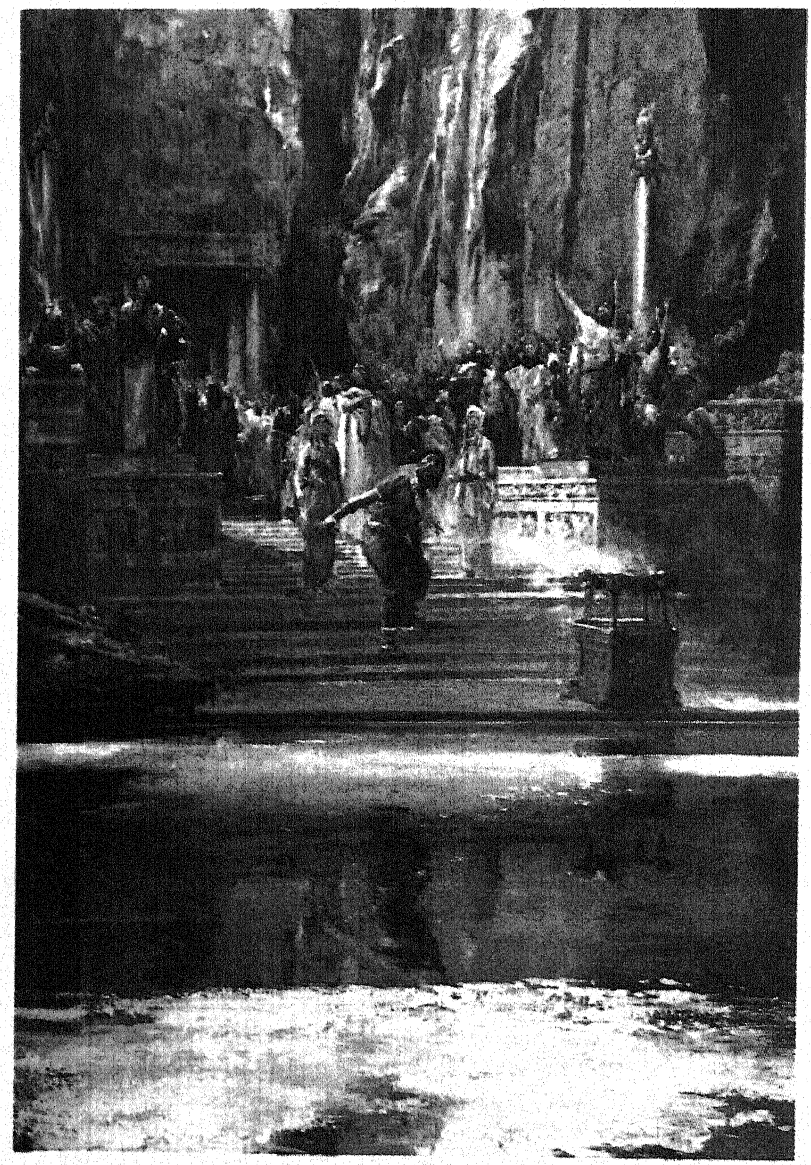
"You should not have come." Wildly Lannon considered halting the ritual. But he dared not withdraw the sacrifice and risk antagonizing the goddess. Appalled, he took a step toward Huy, reaching out one hand as though asking for forgiveness. "I need you," he said hoarsely.

Huy, not understanding, took the hand and smiled at his king and friend as he began to sing the offertory. His voice rose on eagle's wings, up to the sacrificial platform. All eyes in the temple turned upward also, and a hush gripped the worshippers.

TANITH could not believe it was happening. When they had entered her cell in the dawn she had thought it must be Huy come to fetch her away. She had leaped from her couch and run to meet him. But instead it was her sister priestesses come to dress her in the robes and chains of the sacrifice and take her up the secret steps.

The carved stone platform was strewn with sacred blossoms of yellow mimosa. They were crushed beneath Tanith's bare feet as she passed over them weighted down by her chains of gold. Suddenly she stopped, frozen at the voice issuing from far below her.

"Huy!" she whispered. "My lord!" But the upward flight of her spirits was short-lived, for the voice was raised in the offertory. It was Huy who was sending her to the goddess. Desolation opened



before her. Huy had deserted her. Suddenly it was easy to take those last few steps.

As she paused on the brink she spread her arms in the sun sign and looked down into the cavern. The waters of the pool were still and dark, and beside them, tiny, stood the priest. She swayed forward and, as she felt her balance go, Huy's voice stopped abruptly in the middle of a word. Plunging helplessly downward, she heard his voice again, raised in a shriek. "Tanith!"

She struck the surface of the pool with such force that all life was crushed out of her, and the chains plucked her down beneath the water so swiftly that Huy saw only a brief gleam of gold deep down as though a great fish had turned on its side to feed.

In the winter of the Opet year 543, Manatassi crossed the great river with three armies. The smallest, a mere seventy thousand warriors, drove swiftly for the western shores of the lake. Here was the narrow waterway that gave Lannon's galleys access to the ocean, the River of Life that fed the heart of Opet. Manatassi's men severed it. They slaughtered the garrison and burned most of Habbakuk Lal's fleet, which was drawn up on the beach. Then this smallest of Manatassi's armies, and tens of thousands of freed slaves, tore down the whole of a granite hill and dumped it into the waterway, sealing off the city from the outside world.

At the same time a second army burst in the east like a black storm on the hills of Zeng, while the third and largest, three quarters of a million strong, commanded by Manatassi himself, surged across the river at Sett. Old Marmon opposed him with his single legion, only to be crushed in one bloody battle.

Manatassi rolled along the road to Opet, sweeping the land, taking neither prisoner nor loot, burning, smashing, throwing down buildings and scattering the slabs.

The total fighting strength of Opet was then nine legions. Of these one had died with Marmon in the north, and two others were hacked to pieces upon the terraces of Zeng. With the remaining six Lannon marched to meet Manatassi. When they came together Lannon won a victory which gained him two miles and one day's respite—but which cost him four thousand men.

Mago, who commanded Ben-Amon's legion now that the high priest had left Opet, came to Lannon's tent while the sky still glowed like a furnace from the cremation fires. "We took ten of them for each of ours," he reported exultantly.

Lannon sat on his couch while his physician dressed a minor wound in his arm. "How soon can you fight again?" the king asked.

"In four or five days. My men are weary."

"It will be sooner than that," Lannon warned him.

They fought the following day, and again Lannon won a costly victory. But he could not hold the field, and he fell back to a new defensive line, leaving his wounded to the hyena and jackal.

They fought six times more in the next seventy days. At the end of that time they were within twenty miles of Opet. It mattered not that Lannon had won great battles and slain two hundred thousand. His six legions had shrunk to three, and from east and west new armies marched to reinforce Manatassi. Lannon withdrew to the shore of the lake before the city wall.

There Mago found him, and approached him eagerly, bearing the first good news they had received in many long days. "There is word of Huy Ben-Amon, Majesty."

Lannon felt a lift of his spirits. Huy had run from the cavern immediately after the sacrifice and disappeared without a trace. How Lannon had longed for his companionship, his counsel and his comfort. How often in the din of battle had he listened for Huy's cry, "For Baal!" and the song of the great axe.

"Where is he?" the king demanded.

"A fisherman saw him on the island," Mago replied.

FOR Huy the days had drifted past in a haze of grief. Living in the hut where he and Lannon had often stayed, he worked on the golden scrolls; he had brought all five of them with him. He wrote of Tanith, of his love for her, of her life and her death. He lived on fish, growing lean and unkempt. His grief showed in his haunted, half-mad eyes.

One evening, sitting on the sand and pondering the gods who would choose for the sacrifice the beloved of their faithful servant, he found himself wishing he could have told Lannon about Tanith.

If Lannon had known of their love he would have protected her. Until this moment he had hated Lannon for naming Tanith as the sacrifice. But now he began to see how Lannon had acted in good faith, knowing only that the nation was in dire danger and that a valuable messenger was needed. Reluctantly Huy saw that the oracle had been a natural choice. It was no longer Lannon he hated but the merciless gods who had forced him to the deed.

That night, as he sat in the hut, there was a crunch of footsteps in the sand outside. He looked up, and Lannon stood in the doorway. "I need you," the king said. "You promised never to desert me. Do you remember?"

Huy saw the lines of suffering in Lannon's face. He saw a man who was extended to the limits of his strength, and in whose mouth was the bitter taste of defeat. "Yes," said Huy, "I remember." He stood up and went to Lannon.

All night they talked, Lannon telling Huy of the advance of the black hordes, of the mounting despair among the retreating legions, of the destruction of most of his fleet, and of the blocking of the channel.

"How many ships remain?" Huy asked.

"Nine galleys," Lannon replied, "and some fishing craft."

"Enough to carry all of us across the lake?"

"No." Lannon shook his head. "Not nearly enough."

It was almost dawn before Lannon brought himself to ask the question that had to be asked. "Why did you desert me, Huy?"

Lannon must pretend ignorance. Huy had to believe that the king knew nothing of his relationship with the oracle.

"You do not know?" Huy asked, watching Lannon intently.

"I only know that you called out the witch's name, and then you were gone." Lannon's blue eyes were direct and steadfast. "What was it, Huy? What drove you from the temple?"

"Tanith. I loved her."

Lannon looked stricken. "Oh, my friend, what have I done to you? I did not know, Huy, I did not know."

Huy dropped his gaze to the fire. "I believe you," he said.

"Pray Baal's forgiveness for me, Huy, that I should ever have given you grief."

"No, Lannon, I shall never pray again. I have lost my love, and now I have nothing."

"You still have me, old friend."

Huy smiled at him. "Yes," he agreed. "I still have you."

THEY carried the golden scrolls down to the beach where the crew of a fishing boat waited, and by early morning they came to Opet. The legions cheered them as they moved through the encampments. They ate the noon meal with their officers, then went up onto the cliffs and watched Manatassi's hordes debouch from the hills. It seemed endless, this flow of men onto the lakeshore, and the two commanders were silent and subdued.

In the dusk they went down to the harbor and supervised the embarkation of Opet's women and children into the remaining galleys. They would lie offshore until the battle was decided. If the day went against Opet, then they would be taken across the lake and the people would strike south. The men who survived the battle would follow as best they might.

Lannon took leave of his wives and children. He barely glanced at them as each came to kneel before him. The children kissed Huy for the last time, and huskily he said his farewells.

As Lannon and Huy hurried back to the encampment the streets were full of drunkenness, the lowly citizens snatching a few last pleasures. Dark shapes scurried in the shadows, bowed under heavy burdens—looters plundering the empty houses of the rich. Huy felt alarm for his golden books. "Majesty, grant me an hour. I must take leave of my household. My house slaves must be released from their duties and my valuables hidden."

"As you will," Lannon conceded. "Meet me in my tent when you can."

The old slaves could not understand Huy's dismissal. "This is our home," they pleaded. "Do not drive us out."

He left them huddled in the kitchens, bewildered and afraid, while he and one of the younger slaves carried the scrolls into the cavern of Astarte. He paused beside the pool and looked down into its depths. "Wait for me, my love," he whispered.

The temple guard greeted him joyfully, and helped him place

the scrolls in jars, sealing them and hiding them behind the larger jars on the stone shelves. Then Huy led the guard, one hundred strong, back through the city to the army encampment.

There Lannon spoke to them. "You are to be my personal guard. When the battle begins, stay close with me and Huy Ben-Amon."

Until midnight Lannon and Huy sat preparing their plan of battle. "The rest is in the hands of the gods," Lannon said finally. "Now a bowl of wine, and then sleep."

As they stood outside the tent, talking and drinking together, something which Huy thought for a moment was a big brown dog sleeping curled against the side of the tent stirred at their voices. It was the little Bushman huntmaster, Xhai. He shook himself awake, grinned when he saw Lannon, and then came to squat beside him.

"I have tried to send him away," said Lannon. "He will not leave. How can I force him to go?"

"Send him on an errand," whispered Huy, "to search for sign of the gry-lion upon the southern shores. He will believe that."

"Yes," Lannon agreed. "Tell him, Huy."

Huy explained to the little brown man, who grinned and nodded with delight. He clasped Lannon's knees, bobbing his head, and then vanished among the shadows of the camp.

Once he had gone they were silent awhile until Lannon said, "Do you recall the prophecy? Who will reign in Opet after me?"

Huy nodded. "He who kills the gry-lion," he repeated.

"What must I fear?"

"Blackness." Huy looked away to the north, where the great black beast now crouched. Lannon's thoughts paralleled his own.

"Yes, Huy. Blackness." He drained his wine bowl and hurled it upon the watch fire. "And death at the hand of a friend," he said, remembering the prophecy of the oracle. Then he saw Huy's face, ravished with grief. "Forgive me, old friend. I should not have reminded you of the girl."

Huy too drank the last of his wine and threw the bowl upon the fire. A spout of sparks flew upward. He did not need to be reminded of Tanith, she was never out of his thoughts. "Let us rest now," he said.

SHOUTING AND TRUMPETS woke Huy. It was still dark. His first thought was of a night attack upon the camp, and he threw on his armor and staggered out of the tent. Above the lake the night sky was aglow. Lannon joined him, still half asleep. "What is it, Huy?"

"The fleet," Huy replied, understanding at last what was happening. "The women."

"Merciful Baal!" gasped Lannon. They ran together down to the harbor. Manatassi's men had taken the fire tubes from the captured galleys and installed them in the bows of a pair of fishing boats, which now stood off the harbor mouth squirting the fire of Baal upon the water. It had burst into a solid wall of flame.

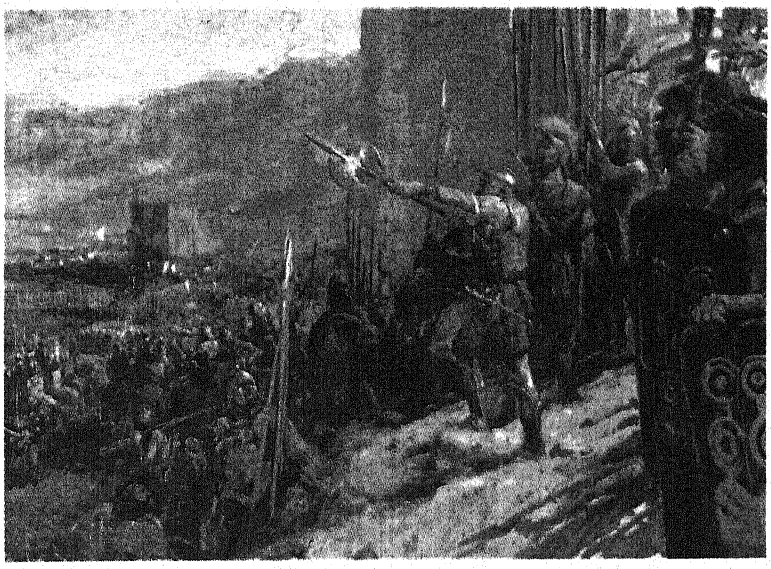
Huy stood beside Lannon on the wharf, watching helplessly. The galleys of Habbakuk Lal were islands in the sea of fire, their decks crowded with screaming women and children. Like ants on a piece of firewood, they scrambled and milled aimlessly until the circle of flame tightened about them and shriveled them.

When the last flames had died, the two fishing boats hoisted sail and bore out northward to where Manatassi's army was now stirring like an awakening monster in the dawn.

THIS was the mood in which to fight the last battle, Huy thought as he strode with Lannon along the ranks—this bitter blend of sadness and anger. There was a spring in Lannon's step that belied his grief-sick face. Huy followed a pace behind, the axe on his shoulder. His armor was highly polished and sparkled in the early morning sunlight. Mago and a group of officers followed them.

On their left stretched the azure of the lake. Beyond its shore plain rose the rugged cliffs, touched with delicate shades of pink and capped with green. Huy, looking at lake and cliff, saw them only as points on which to anchor his flanks. It was a good place to fight. Ahead the land was open—a clear front a mile wide, from which no surprise could spring. In their rear were the buildings and streets of the lower city, farther back the massive walls of the temple.

The legions were drawn up in battle formation, light infantry thrown out in a screen, while behind them were the heavy infantry, big men armed with axe and war spear. To the rear were



the archers, drawn up in neat blocks from which they could deliver massed flights of arrows over the heads of the infantry.

Behind the archers were the baggage boys, ready with the bundles of javelins and arrows, bags of cold meat and corn cakes, amphoras of water and wine, spare helmets, swords and axes, and other items which the battle would expend or destroy.

"Leave a few of the enemy for us, Holiness!" a grizzled axeman shouted.

"I think there will be plenty for all of us," Huy replied.

"Too many?" another voice questioned.

"Not enough," Lannon answered. "For none of those who oppose us is named Ben-Amon."

They cheered then lustily as Lannon and Huy took their places at the center of the line. Above their heads the standards stood, gaudy with gold and with multicolored tassels, and at their backs the hundred men of the temple guard. Huy looked them over proudly, and thought that these were good men in whose company to die.

"Wine here!" Huy ordered. He saluted his officers first with a

raised bowl, then turned to Lannon. They looked at each other.

"Fly for me, bird of the sun," said Lannon softly.

"Roar for me, Gry-Lion of Opet." They drank, and broke the bowls, and laughed together for the last time.

MANATASSI came in the middle of the bright hot morning. He came on a front that filled the plain from lakeshore to cliff foot. He came singing with five hundred thousand throats, and the rhythmic slapping of bare feet and war rattles which rolled across the sky like the thunder of the heavens. He came in rank upon countless rank, so there was no end to his advance, and the singing was deep and murmurous.

He came like the shadow of storm clouds moving stately and slow across the land. He came dark as night and numerous as the grass of the fields, and the singing took on a harsher, more menacing sound.

Huy lifted the vulture axe over his head, glanced left and right to make certain that each commander of archers had seen the signal, and watched the black tide wash toward him. The singing changed, shrilling into the blood trill, a high ululation as chilling as any sound Huy had ever heard. He felt the hair at the back of his neck come erect.

One hundred paces. Huy brought down the axe and instantly the air was filled with the soft whistle of arrows arching over and falling into the enemy's ranks. A growl came out of the blackness, as the beast came on steadily into the javelins.

Huy's light infantry fell back before this massive advance. It seemed as though nothing could check it. Then, unbelievably, the blackness was no longer moving. And a minute later it was drawing back from Huy's axe and spearmen of the center. Immediately the javelin men advanced to harass the retreat, while the cries of the centurions carried clearly to Huy—"Close up here!" "Fill that gap!" "Men here!"—as they repaired their line.

Manatassi gathered himself and surged forward again, gained a yard of ground and drew back to bunch himself before crashing into Huy's front once more. At noon Lannon and Huy were forced from their vantage point.

An hour after noon Huy ordered the last of his reserves into the line, holding back only the temple guard. He gave ground slowly. At last the enemy was into the lower city. Once in the narrow streets, Huy was drawn into the fighting for the first time that day. A small group of wild-eyed black men burst through the rank ahead of him. Huy cut them down personally, and ordered a squad of the temple guard into the gap. But he knew then that the battle was out of his control. He and Lannon were isolated, able to direct only those of their men within sound of their voices.

From some distant part of the city came an animal roar of triumph. Lannon caught Huy's shoulder. "They have broken through!" he shouted.

Huy nodded. Now the battle would become a rout. They must fall back to the temple. They gathered the temple guard about them and moved back along the streets. But Manatassi's hordes had put fire to the lower city and the flames were taking a swift grip. The streets were choked with terrified citizens and wild, blood-spattered warriors. Huy and Lannon drove through till they reached the main temple gate. There Huy and ten men held the steps while Lannon had the gates swung closed.

They were resting on their bloody weapons, loosening their helmets, when Huy turned to Lannon. "Is the east gate held?"

Lannon stared at him in dismay, his silence answering.

Huy picked a group with a quick wave of his arm. "You men, follow me!" But he was too late. Across the temple enclosure black warriors were streaming through the smaller east gate.

"Back to the cavern!" Huy shouted. They raced in a tight bunch for the cave's entrance. Only four of them reached it: Lannon, Huy and two legionaries.

"Here they come!" Lannon shouted, and Huy hefted the axe. Between them they held the entrance till it was clogged with piles of Manatassi's dead warriors.

Then the enemy archers came up and the first volley of arrows swept down on them. One of them struck a legionary in the throat. "No cover here," Huy shouted. "Back to the inner temple."

As they ran the next volley whistled among them. An arrow found a seam in the last legionary's breastplate. His legs collapsed.

Huy and Lannon crossed the cavern of Astarte, reaching the door of the inner temple as the third flight of arrows hummed around them. Lannon stumbled slightly, and then they were into the temple.

"Can we hold them here?" Lannon gasped.

"No." Huy stopped to catch his breath. "The archives!" Then he looked at Lannon. "What is it, Majesty?"

"I am hit, Huy." The arrow stood out of the joint of his armor beneath the left armpit, and Huy felt a cold gust of despair. Clearly it was a mortal wound.

"There is no pain," Lannon said. "It cannot be too bad."

Huy snapped off the shaft and led Lannon gently through into the archives.

"The sun door?" Lannon asked.

"Only at the very end. Only when all else fails." And he steered the king into one of the stone recesses.

Staring at Huy in the uncertain light of the torches, Lannon noticed a gaping slash across Huy's cheek. "Your face," he said.

"No doubt it's an improvement." Huy grunted as he tore a strip from his tunic and made a crude sling for Lannon's left arm. "Can you use it?" he asked, and Lannon opened and closed his fingers.

"Good." Huy cocked his head, listening to the approach of stealthy footsteps and the whispering. "They are coming," he said. Side by side he and Lannon went down the passage to meet the rush of dark bodies that came at them.

MANATASSI stood in the temple of Astarte and stared into the dark mouth of the tunnel which had swallowed up so many of his men—and where the two fighting devils of Opet still held out, defying all his efforts to dislodge them.

Even now his warriors were dragging dead and wounded from the entrance. One had his right arm lopped off above the elbow. Manatassi knew what weapon had inflicted that terrible wound. A superstitious dread gripped him. He had learned enough of the gods of Opet to fear them, and he knew that he stood in their stronghold, in their holy place. He remembered hearing of a secret inner sanctum, and of the death curse that guarded it.

"Bring fire," he said. "Smoke them from their den like dogs."

They built the fire in the entrance of the tunnel and fed it with green branches. Dense smoke filled the temple. They ringed the entrance, holding their weapons ready, but no man came out.

When the fire burned low Manatassi took a torch and stepped into the tunnel. He picked his way among the dead. The torch threw light into each of the stone recesses with their burdened shelves. He thought he knew what the pots contained; he had assisted Huy often enough with the parchment scrolls. He looked for a sign of the high priest now, but there was none.

He reached the end of the passage and in the torchlight saw the engraved symbol of the sun god on the farthest wall. His courage melted at this evidence of divine influence.

On the floor below the image something caught his eye. He suppressed a gasp. It was the vulture axe, laid like an offering before the god. And the place was empty.

They had gone to their gods. They had cheated him of his revenge, and led him into deadly peril, into direct confrontation with the supernatural. He backed away until the god image merged into the darkness. Then he turned and ran from the place, through the passage and into the great temple cavern. From there he looked back at the tunnel mouth. "Bring me masons from among the freed slaves and seal off that entrance. It is evil."

As they ran to obey, Manatassi's courage returned to him. "I will destroy this evil. I place a curse upon this place, upon these cliffs. A curse that will last forever." His voice rose to a scream. "Burn it! Destroy it! It is an evil to be cleaned from the earth and from the minds of men forever."

So the masons worked with the skills that the men of Opet had taught them. When they had finished, the entrance to the tomb of the kings had vanished.

Then Manatassi destroyed the city. He slew all living things and threw the bodies on the fires which raged through the lower city. Then he looked at the walls and the towers, and he pointed with his iron claw. His men tore them down block by massive block. They went down to the very foundations. They lifted the flagged pavings and tore out the stone wharves of the harbor.

They razed the city until no trace of it remained. Then they carried each block of masonry up to the cavern and dropped it into the bottomless green pool.

When Manatassi marched eastward from the city of Opet to complete the destruction of the empire, he left nothing behind him but piles of loose ash which the wind was already scattering in pale skeins of dust.

Manatassi spread his regiments like a net across the four kingdoms, with the command to destroy all trace of the cities and the mines and the gardens of the men of Opet. But his hatred had burned low now, like a forest fire when the trees are gone, and it had left him hollow and dying, his huge battered frame an uncaring husk, even the smoky yellow eyes dull and indifferent.

He came to Zimbao, the great walled city of the middle kingdom. Like his own body, it was untenanted, empty and deserted.

Manatassi wrapped himself in a fur cloak and lay down beside the watch fire. In the morning they found his body stiff and cold.

They buried him outside the walls, and then they quarreled and fought among themselves, for Manatassi had named no successor, and his army split into a hundred tribes.

In time both Manatassi and the city of Opet faded from the memory of men.

WHEN Xhai, the Bushman, who had been the master of the king's hunt, was an old man and knew he was dying, he came back to Opet.

Cut off from the sea, the lake had dwindled, its shores now twenty miles from the red cliffs, its waters brackish and shallow.

Xhai walked over the spot on which the temple of Baal had stood without recognizing it, until he saw the cleft in the red rock leading to the cavern of Astarte.

He camped beside the pool, building a small fire and sitting over it mumbling to himself in the manner of old men. When his memories paraded before him they were magnified and magnificent, and he sought to capture and to fix them.

He picked up his belt on which were strung little horn pots of pigment, and he went to the wall that Manatassi's masons had

built at the rear of the cavern. He made the outline of a figure in charcoal upon the smoothest place of the wall. He worked slowly and carefully, with great love.

Then he mixed his pigments and began to paint the proud godlike figure with its white face, red-gold beard and vaunting manhood, and as he worked it seemed as though ghost voices whispered deep in the rock, down in the vault of the kings.

"Huy, I am cold. Favor me, old friend. Give me the hand of friendship that the oracle foresaw."

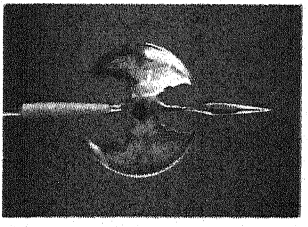
"I cannot, Lannon. I cannot do it."

"I am cold and in pain, Huy. If you love me, you will do it."

"I love you."

"Fly for me, bird of the sun."

As the old Bushman worked, the wind whispered and sighed along the cliffs, and the sigh was that which a man might make when he has lost his love and his land, when he has denied his gods and has given mercy to his friend. He might sigh like that as he takes the sword still dulled with his friend's blood and sets the hilt firmly in a niche in the stone floor and places the point up close under his ribs, and falls forward upon it.



FROM the Rand *Daily Mail:*

DEATH OF MULTIMILLIONAIRE FINANCIER
Louren Sturvesant Dies of Mystery Disease

BOTSWANA, May 27. The well-known millionaire financier and sportsman, Mr. Louren Sturvesant of Kleine Schuur, Sandown, Johannesburg, died here yesterday after a brief illness.

Mr. Sturvesant was visiting the site of the recently discovered ancient Carthaginian city in Botswana. The leader of the expedition, Dr. Benjamin Kazin, also contracted the disease, believed to be infectious, and was flown to Johannesburg, where a hospital spokesman stated that his condition is critical.

FROM the Johannesburg *Star:*

ARCHAEOLOGIST REGAINS CONSCIOUSNESS

JOHANNESBURG, June 3. After ten days in coma, Dr. Benjamin Kazin today regained consciousness, according to a spokesman at Groote Schuur Hospital.

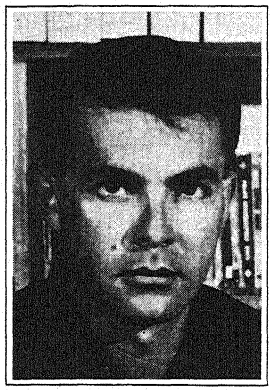
Dr. Kazin is the director of the Institute of African Anthropology and Prehistory, and the discoverer of the ancient Carthaginian city of Opet. He was suffering from a rare fungus infection contracted while working on the site of his recent find.

Today Dr. Kazin was visited by his assistant, Dr. Sally Benator, who said afterward that he was "very much better but still terribly upset by the death of Mr. Sturvesant."

FROM the Johannesburg *Star:*

WELL-KNOWN ARCHAEOLOGISTS MARRY

CAPE TOWN, September 6. The discoverer of the city of Opet, Dr. Benjamin Kazin, was married to his long-time assistant, Dr. Sally Benator, in a brief civil ceremony here today. The bride said that they planned a working honeymoon at the site of the ancient city.



The Ghost of an Idea

Wilbur Smith was born in 1933 in what was then Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). While he was still a small boy he and his younger sister were taken by their parents to visit the world-famous ruins of Zimbabwe in Southern Rhodesia. When the children were left by themselves for a short time, the boy decided to play his favorite game: frightening his sister with ghost stories. On this occasion, however, the game backfired. The ruins of the ancient city worked on his imagination, conjuring up their own ghosts. When the parents returned they found not only the little girl but Wilbur, too, quaking in a corner, terrified.

It was this childhood event that sparked Wilbur Smith's lifelong interest in his continent's confused prehistory. While hardly into his teens he was to go into the bush on hunting expeditions with native gunbearers as his sole companions; he was to listen to their stories; he was even, in later years, to become the close friend of one of their most notable and wisest witch doctors, Credo Mutwa, the first Zulu ever to tell the outside world the secret legends of his people.

The day came when suddenly the theories of the archaeologists and the tales Smith heard around the campfires fitted together in his mind. This was how it must have been. The experts who believed in a Carthaginian migration down the west coast of Africa were right: the natives, with their stories of fair-skinned invaders, proved it. Somewhere in the dead, dry center of Africa there had once been a flourishing civilization, sun worship, walled cities, biremes moving on an inland sea. . . .

The Sunbird is Wilbur Smith's seventh novel. Today he lives in Cape Town, South Africa, with his wife, Danielle, and their three children.

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The drama of a long, hot weekend
when a small force of state policemen held
the safety of a city in their hands
STATE TROOPER
a condensation of the book by
NOEL B. GERSON
ILLUSTRATED BY HARRY SCHAARE

Labor Day weekend. To most Connecticut citizens it meant the end of summer. But to the state police the holiday spelled trouble—possibly big trouble—and it was all going to land in Lieutenant Red Martin's lap.

A rock festival was expected to attract fifty thousand young people—and a proportionate number of dope peddlers and mischief-makers. A black militant organization planned a major uprising, and it was rumored that two rival motorcycle gangs would start a rumble. As weekend tensions rose to a peak, Red Martin had little time to think of personal matters, and what his job as a policeman was doing to his marriage. His devotion to duty was matched by that of special agents Lindsay Northrup and Annie Kirkland, whose undercover assignments placed them in peril of their lives.

I

TUESDAY NIGHT

AFTER eighteen years in the state police, he had become used to telephone calls at ungodly hours. It was a reflex action to roll over and pick up the receiver on its second ring. "Martin."

"Sergeant Donovan, Lieutenant."

Harlow R. Martin, commanding officer of Troop R, Connecticut state police, automatically looked at the luminous dial of the bedside alarm clock. It was 11:53 p.m. He had been asleep barely three-quarters of an hour. "What's the problem, Mike?"

"A Teletype message just came through from HQ Two."

HQ 2 was Lieutenant Colonel Merrill Craven, executive officer of the entire force. "I'm listening," Martin said.

" 'Effective at 0700 hours on Thursday, and continuing through the Labor Day weekend, all furloughs, leaves of absence, and days off are canceled. Acknowledge. By order of Commissioner Chance.' It's signed by Craven."

"Acknowledge receipt, Mike." Martin was wide-awake now.

"I have, sir. What's it all about?"

"We can talk about it at breakfast. Have a complete schedule of men who are slated for time off on my desk by 7:30. And post copies of the order on my bulletin board, in the sergeants' office, and in the dayroom." Martin rang off.

Emily had propped herself on one elbow and was staring at him. "Go back to sleep, honey," he said. "No emergency."

"I'm not sleepy." She reached for a cigarette. Married at nineteen and a mother at twenty, Emily, at thirty-eight, was as beautiful as her own daughters. Her hair was still pale gold, her eyes were luminous, and her figure was as supple as a girl's. Yet almost twenty years of marriage to a cop had put creases in her forehead and at the corners of her eyes. "I'm going to make some coffee," she said, climbing out of bed. "Want some?"

"It would keep me awake until dawn." Martin sometimes resented her forgetfulness.

"From the sound of your voice just now, it wouldn't matter. You aren't going to get more than a nap." She swept out of the room, a hint of suppressed anger in her tone.

His bare feet searched for his slippers. He stretched, stood, and hauled on his robe. As a young trooper he had posed for a recruiting poster, and at forty-two he was still in excellent condition. Following Emily into the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator. "I'll have a beer. That'll help put me out."

Emily continued to busy herself at the stove. "Why do you need to be knocked out?"

"No special reason."

"Come off it, Harlow. I know something is happening." His mother had been the only other person who called him Harlow. To everyone else he was Red.

"Okay," he said, and became evasive. "I can't go shopping with you and the girls in Winthrop tomorrow. But I'll make it up by taking all of you to dinner."

Emily groaned. "Billie has a date, and I suspect Myra has."

"Better. It'll just be us."

"What's on the docket tomorrow?"

"All weekend leaves have been canceled."

"Oh, no! You know we've been planning all summer to join Mother and Dad on the Cape over Labor Day!"

"You and the kids can go. I'm stuck." He sipped his beer.

"It isn't fair. Can't we ever take a holiday like normal people? We were stuck here over the Fourth of July. In fact, you haven't been to the Cape this summer. I'm sick of making excuses for you."

He ran a big hand through his thinning, reddish brown hair.

"If your mother and father have been reading the newspapers, they know I haven't stayed away by choice. We've had two riots in Winthrop, two in Hartford, another in New Haven. Hell, Em, they know I'm a cop."

"Precisely. You seem to forget that after Korea you were so enamored of your first lieutenant's uniform that you refused Dad's offer of a job in his company. And when you decided to become a trooper, they urged me not to marry you."

A feeling of despair overcame him. "You remember only what you want to remember," he said forcefully. "Your family has told me a hundred times they're proud of me."

Emily always lowered her voice when he began to shout. "All right, Harlow. I've often been sorry I married a policeman, but never more than now. Why should I waste my life waiting for you to come home so exhausted that you sleep around the clock?"

Martin regretted his harsh tone. "Honey, I've told you. Take the kids to the Cape. Leave a day earlier than we'd planned. Your folks will love it, and so will you." He held out his arms to her.

Emily jerked away from him, spilling her coffee. "As a psychologist, you're just an old-fashioned bull cop! There are times a woman wants to be left alone."

He hesitated for an instant, then went downstairs to the family room to watch the late news. He could have blasted her, but they had had far too many quarrels lately. It wouldn't help their marriage to tell her he would be glad when morning came and he could go back to the familiar world of the Troop R barracks.

SERGEANT Donovan was hungry, but there was no time for even a sandwich before the shift changed at 12:30. Troopers were coming in from evening patrol, their arrest and warning slips piling high on the spindle in the dispatcher's office. Without exception they complained when they read the order canceling leaves.

Members of the midnight shift were in the mess hall, drinking coffee and eating doughnuts before going on duty, while those from the evening shift were helping themselves to roast beef sandwiches. Thanks to the order from Hartford, the troopers were noisy, and Mike Donovan—newly promoted to sergeant—had to

close his door to concentrate. He wanted no mistakes in the log when Lieutenant Martin read it in the morning.

The door opened and closed, and Sergeant Henry Cohen dropped his summer-weight trooper's hat on a pile of report books. "Did you just post the order canceling leaves?"

Mike nodded. "Listening to those guys gripe makes me wonder what the hell they expected when they joined." He rose and gave his successor the duty chair. "I called the lieutenant."

"How did he take it?"

"Like I was telling him the time of day. He already had the feeling our leaves would be canceled because of the rock festival."

Cohen settled in and glanced through the logbook.

"There was a fire at the diner just off the turnpike on Route 234," Mike said. "Four people taken to Winthrop General with minor burns. I sent a plainclothesman to investigate, and two detectives came down from the fire marshal's division in Hartford. So far it looks like an accident in the kitchen."

"Okay," Cohen said. "Want some coffee before you leave?"

"Not tonight. I want to get some sleep."

In a noisy Winthrop bar Lindsay Roosevelt Northrup ordered two more gin and tonics, then slowly slid his hand up and down the thigh of the girl who sat beside him. She wore too much makeup and her platinum wig looked incongruous against her chocolate skin. Lindsay had to remind himself he was on assignment.

Diane moved closer to him, her scrap of a skirt riding still higher. "Man," she murmured, "you're something else."

"Your friends don't think so, baby."

"Like who?"

"The boss. He told me again tonight to stay away from you."

"He's got no business saying that." Her dark eyes blazed. "What I do on my own time is my business."

"I don't scare easy," Lindsay said, and kissed her.

Lindsay Northrup had been born and reared a scant three blocks from this cheap bar. Through hard work and scholarships he had escaped from the Winthrop slums and gotten a college degree. He had won a battlefield commission in Vietnam, and

later had joined the Connecticut state police. If he had been sensible he'd be in uniform today, like a lot of smart black cops. But after graduating from the academy, he had joined the CID—the Criminal Intelligence Division—and had spent the past three years in undercover work. Nobody in the Winthrop ghetto except Mama and Uncle Dave knew he was a state trooper; even his own cousins thought he supported himself in shady ways.

Yet it was more than a yearning for respectability, and the opportunity to pay court to a decent girl, that soured him on his work. He had gone stale. And a tired agent was a vulnerable one. He had reason to believe that El Fatah suspected him of being an informer, that this was why the hooker was making a play for him. Her lover, Andy Lennox, was a member of El Fatah's secret executive committee for all of New England.

Lindsay knew he was playing with fire. With luck, he could use her as an instrument to send Lennox to prison. But if she unmasked him first, his throat would be slit.

"Rosey man," Diane said, "you're gettin' me all eager."

"Let's split." He fished for some crumpled dollar bills.

Diane hesitated. "It wouldn't be smart to go to my place. Sometimes Andy shows up there late at night."

"What's wrong with my room?" He felt certain she had been ordered to search his quarters for evidence that he was an undercover agent. Well, she could search all night. She would find nothing. "I've got me a pint of gin there, and a few joints."

"Why not?" The girl jumped up and started toward the exit with Lindsay following. Outside, the summer night was hot. She slipped her arm through his as they strolled down John Winthrop Boulevard, the main street of the ghetto.

A young man in a faded shirt and jeans fell in a dozen paces behind the pair, and Lindsay knew that his partner, Joe Borden, was following them. Though the two troopers lived in the same rooming house, they were never seen together, and met for brief conferences only when they were certain they were alone.

As Lindsay and the girl turned down a side street he saw that Joe was slowly closing the gap separating them, ready to come to his aid if danger threatened. CID regulations required under-

cover agents to operate in pairs, one working on a case while the other protected him. It made a man feel easier to know an armed comrade was tailing him. Particularly at a time like this, when Lindsay hoped to learn where El Fatah planned its threatened civil disturbances over the Labor Day weekend.

The pair entered a house and climbed to the third floor, where Lindsay unlocked a door. "Welcome to Rosey's Roost," he said. The dropping of his first name was his one concession to the possible need for a change of identity. The less need a man had for a cover identity, the less were the chances he'd be trapped.

The room was like many in the ghetto, with an old brass bed the principal object of furniture. There were several dilapidated chairs, a hot plate on an old table, and racing forms scattered on the threadbare rug. Nothing was out of key. "This is nice," the girl said, and sitting on the bed, kicked off her shoes.

"What'll it be, gin or pot?" Lindsay asked.

"Right now what I want is a little first-class lovin'." She stretched out on the bed and smiled at him.

The scraping of a chair in the room above them told Lindsay his partner had arrived there. Pulling off his T-shirt, he moved toward the bed. Diane had made herself available far too quickly, and he was sure she would try to sniff him out before they parted.

"Man, you're what I need." She drew him down beside her. At least, he told himself, not all undercover work was distasteful. Diane appeared to respond to him, and if she was simulating she was a better actress than he had thought.

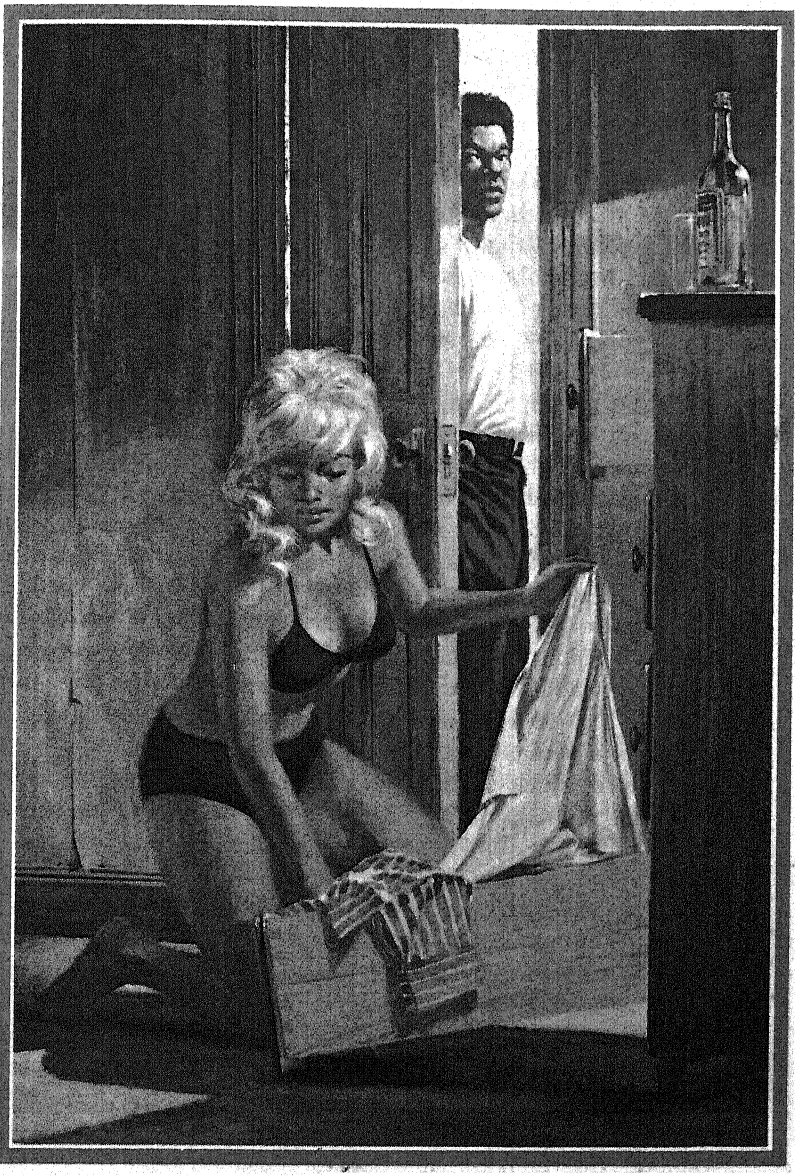
Later, she lay beside him for a short time, then sat up and lighted a cigarette.

"How about a joint?"

"Not yet. Before I go, Rosey."

Lindsay shrugged, rose, and went into the bathroom. He turned on the water faucets and then carefully opened the door a crack. As he had expected, Diane was searching through the dresser drawers. He allowed her to take her time. She wouldn't need long, and he wanted to convince her that he was not an informer.

When he finally left the bathroom she was pulling on her blouse and skirt. "Let's have that joint now," he suggested.



The girl shook her head. "Another night, Rosey. The big boy will beat hell out of me if I don't hightail it to his place."

"See here," Lindsay said. "Andy has no call to hate my guts. I've put in a year of loyal, hard work in El Fatah, and he's got no call to want to carve me up just because we like the same broad."

"I'll tell him, baby."

"Yeah, you do that. Then maybe he'll let me come to the big meeting tomorrow night."

"I'll tell him, baby," she repeated with greater emphasis.

Was she trying to convey to him that she had found him innocent? Lindsay's spirits rose.

THE trooper on special duty at the entrance to the governor's mansion in Hartford stood stiffly at attention and saluted when the rawboned man with gray hair climbed out of his car.

Connecticut Police Commissioner Edward Chance grinned and returned the salute. "They keeping you busy, Trooper?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Cars moving in and out every half hour."

"Well, I may be the last tonight, so you won't have to put in for too much overtime." The thought that all noncommissioned members of the force had to be paid for additional duty over forty hours never failed to rile the commissioner. When he had been a recruit he had worked a sixty- to seventy-hour week without extra pay. Today's young were a different breed.

As a secretary conducted Chance along a corridor, the majority and minority leaders of the state House of Representatives, coming from the opposite direction, stopped to shake the commissioner's hand. In two years Ed Chance had learned the importance of politicians. His budget and the laws needed to facilitate his force's task depended upon the goodwill of senators and representatives. But today he was in a hurry. "Sorry I can't stop, gentlemen," he said. "I can't keep the governor waiting."

In his private study Governor Warren Trindle greeted him with a weary smile. Ordinarily the governor was one of the most photogenic officials in American public life, but tonight there were deep hollows beneath his eyes. "I've been expecting you for the past two hours, Ed," he said. "How does the weekend look?"

"So-so," Chance said, accepting a chair. "We have no way of estimating how many young people will show up for the rock festival at Pine Lodge Lake. Could be ten, twenty-five, one hundred thousand. We'll have some notion by tomorrow night when the early arrivals start to drift in."

The governor was uneasy. "Your men can't handle one hundred thousand rock fans, Ed!"

"Never said they could, sir. But I won't panic until I know for sure that will be the size of the crowd."

Trindle was torn between admiration for his commissioner's nonchalance, and apprehensiveness. "What else?" he asked.

"Reports are still coming in through CID that El Fatah is planning to strike somewhere in the area over the weekend."

The thought of El Fatah was enough to erase the governor's remaining peace of mind. The race-oriented organization, which had adopted the name (although with changed spelling) of a Palestinian guerrilla group, was the first of its kind to gain national notoriety since the decline of the Black Panthers. Dedicated to violence against the establishment, El Fatah got its support by means of terror. Its top officials remained anonymous because no black dared to reveal their identities. "Don't you have any line on them, Ed?"

"Sure, lots of lines, just like the FBI and everybody else. We have some of our most competent men assigned to them. We keep hoping to hear from our agents, but we don't expect miracles."

Trindle sighed. "What precautions are you taking?" he asked.

"All leaves have been canceled, and the entire force will be on duty. Most of the regulars will be relieved of traffic duty, and the auxiliaries will patrol the highways. The present regular strength is 971 men. The auxiliaries have 1643."

The governor grimaced at the mention of the auxiliary state police—the unpaid volunteers who performed secondary services and freed state troopers for more urgent work. In his judgment the auxiliaries were pretend policemen, incapable of performing adequately because they were not permitted to carry firearms or make arrests.

The commissioner caught his expression and immediately be-

came defensive. "I've spent thirty-one years on the force, and I know the auxies are worth their weight in gold. Ask any division head or group commander. They'll tell you."

"Suppose there's too much for your regulars *and* the auxiliaries."

"Don't forget the city PDs, Governor."

"All right, *and* the city police departments!" Trindle's nerves were becoming frayed.

"You're thinking of calling out the Guard," said Chance.

"I am. And I'm afraid it will be political suicide."

The commissioner persisted. "How long will the call-up take?"

"General Wolff informs me that the first units can go into the field within a couple of hours. But it will take twelve to twenty-four hours to muster the entire division."

"I can imagine no crisis so terrible that I'd need more support than his infantry brigades. But even that would have to be a far more drastic situation than the one we're facing. We don't even know if El Fatah intends to make a move in Connecticut. The call-up of the Guard would give them their biggest propaganda weapon ever. We'd be admitting we're afraid of them—and of a batch of young kids at a rock festival."

"How do you propose to handle the festival?" Trindle asked.

"Delicately. Like balancing a feather on my nose. I'll send you a copy of my field orders tomorrow. I'm sure we'll be okay."

"Meanwhile I hope you won't mind if I put the senior officers of the Guard on a secret standby alert."

"As you wish, sir. And I give you my word, I won't be too proud to yell for help if I need it." But only in extremis, Ed Chance told himself, would he be willing to admit that the state police could not cope with the problems of the coming weekend.

ANNIE Kirkland maneuvered her Ford into the garage behind the house she shared with her sister. The car looked like an ordinary convertible, and no one would have guessed that it was a souped-up vehicle made expressly for police purposes, capable of traveling at 140 miles per hour.

Pat Dyer was watching a late television show. She looked at the clock as her younger sister entered, but held her tongue, re-

minding herself that Annie was twenty-six. More than that, she had been a registered nurse at twenty-one, a bride at twenty-two, and a widow at twenty-three. Now, for the past two years she had been a policewoman, and Pat still found the idea distasteful. The Dyer girls had been reared as ladies.

"There was a phone message for you about an hour ago," Pat said. "A Captain MacGregor wants you to call. He said," she added severely, "that you know his number."

A dimple appeared in Annie's right cheek when she smiled. "You just bet I do," she replied. She hurried off to her own bedroom, and carefully closed the door before she dialed the CID private line on the West Hartford exchange.

"MacGregor," a deep voice boomed at the other end of the line.

"Trooper Kirkland, Captain. You called me?"

"I've been pining away for you all evening." MacGregor treated the fourteen women on the force with mock romantic gallantry. "How did your job for Troop R work out?"

"I'm batting .500, sir," Annie said. "Mary and I were tracking a couple of runaway teen-age girls, and we got one. I'm sure we'll get the other at the rock festival this weekend."

"Mary will have to handle that part of the assignment. I have another little job for you, Annie, and I'm sure Lieutenant Martin will let me borrow you. Of course it's strictly voluntary."

"I understand, Captain." Annie smiled to herself. Virtually all assignments given to women troopers were voluntary, but she had yet to turn down a job.

"Do you think you could get up to Hartford by 7:30 to have breakfast with me at headquarters?"

She'd have to be up at 5:45 in order to leave for Hartford no later than 6:30. "Certainly, Captain. I'll be there."

"Good girl. I'm counting on you, Annie," the CID chief added with uncharacteristic candor.

Annie abandoned the idea of a bedtime snack. She'd need all the sleep she could get. As she began to undress, Pat entered the room. "What did Captain MacGregor want?" she asked.

"He didn't say. I'm to see him in Hartford for breakfast."

Pat's eyes narrowed. "Is he married?"

Annie's laugh was genuine. "Captain MacGregor is the most completely married man you ever saw. He loves his wife, his children, his dogs, his cat, and his home."

"Well, you be careful," Pat said, "eating breakfast with a married man."

Just the way Mother used to sound, Annie thought, but she said only "Good night, Pat," and disappeared into the bathroom.

THE speedometer needle shot up to 90 mph, and then gradually inched up to 97. Trooper Karl Roebish, sitting beside the driver, surreptitiously wiped his palms on the sides of his blue-striped black trousers. During his training at the academy he had done some pretty tricky driving in "skid school," but this was different. He was taking part in his first real chase.

Trooper Richard Duncan leaned forward as he gripped the wheel, but he spoke casually. "You'll notice, rookie, that I'm not using my siren. Sometimes civilians get confused by it, and take too long to clear out of the way. But you'd better put the flasher on. The traffic will get heavier about a mile and a half up ahead. I patrol this stretch of the idiot strip every day, so I know."

Karl Roebish did as he was bidden, and a bright revolving red-and-white light cast its beams ahead, warning other drivers to clear out of the left lane. Less than a minute later there was a noticeable increase in the number of cars on the turnpike.

"There's our guy," Duncan said, "and we're gaining on him." He picked up the hand microphone. "Seventeen R to R. I'm about sixteen miles east of South Winthrop. Closing in on a 461," he said, giving the code number meaning a driver traveling at an extremely hazardous speed.

"Roger, Dick," the dispatcher said. "Keep in touch."

Duncan concentrated on the car ahead, slowly closing the gap. "I've got you now, you bum," he said, and laughed. "There isn't another exit for three miles. Let's give him a taste of the siren and see what he'll do." Duncan pressed a button, and a loud, mournful wail filled the night air. The driver of the other car increased his speed.

"Hang on, kid," Duncan said. "I've got to ride him off the road."

Stepping up his speed he drew even with the car, pulled forward, and then, with consummate skill, crowded close, compelling the driver to slow down and pull onto the right shoulder.

The instant he halted, Duncan bolted out of the cruiser, 220 pounds of angry trooper. Roebish followed, expecting him to ask for the driver's license and car registration, which Roebish had been taught was the procedure. Instead, Duncan wrenched open the door of the other car, grabbed the man by his shirtfront, and hauled him out. "What the hell were you trying to do?" he roared, shaking the man. "Kill yourself and everybody else on the road?"

Roebish was appalled by Duncan's vicious action, which violated police regulations. At last Duncan grew calmer and demanded the man's license and registration. "Keep an eye on him, kid," he said as he stalked off to the cruiser to write a summons.

The driver, a young man, leaned wearily against the side of his car. He reeked of whiskey, but the experience had sobered him, and he was deathly pale. "Damn cops," he muttered. "He didn't have any right to push me around like that."

Karl was too ashamed to reply. In class after class at the academy, instructors had stressed that the day of the rough bull cop was over. Obviously those instructors had never seen Trooper Richard Duncan in action.

Duncan returned, his stride brisk. "Here you are," he said, thrusting the summons at the driver. He turned to Karl. "Headquarters has notified a towing company, and they'll have his car off the road in fifteen minutes. We're taking him in to sober up, so slap the cuffs on him."

There was no fight left in the man, Karl knew. "I can manage him without manacles," he said.

Duncan cursed and, twisting the driver's arms behind his back, put handcuffs on him. They pinched the man's wrists, and he cried out in pain.

"If you resist arrest," Duncan said, pushing him toward the cruiser, "you'll have another charge against you." He shoved the man into the rear seat and fastened a seat belt around him. "Ride back there with him, kid," he told Roebish.

When Karl climbed in he noticed that the man's seat belt was

so tight it was causing him discomfort. Quietly he adjusted the straps, his sense of shame increasing. Maybe it was foolish, but he felt as though dirt had been thrown on the new uniform he had been wearing with great pride for five days.

II

WEDNESDAY

FIVE MINUTES before the alarm was set to ring, Red Martin turned it off. He went into the bathroom to shower and shave, and not until he began to dress did he notice that the secondhand VW he had bought the girls was sitting outside the garage. That meant Billie and Myra had come home late from the church clambake and left the car out rather than open the noisy garage door.

He took his gold-braided commissioned officer's hat from his closet, and turned to look at Emily. He suspected that she was feigning sleep, but he did not disturb her. He did not want to resume last night's quarrel. He strapped on his gun belt and went downstairs for a cup of coffee. As he entered the breakfast room he was surprised to see a steaming cup at his place on the table.

"Boo!" Myra said, emerging from the kitchen.

"Morning, honey." He kissed his younger daughter and refrained from tousling her red hair. She was sixteen and didn't want to be treated like a little girl. "What are you doing up so early?"

"I couldn't sleep," Myra said. "So I thought I'd have breakfast." She placed a bowl of cereal at her place and sat down.

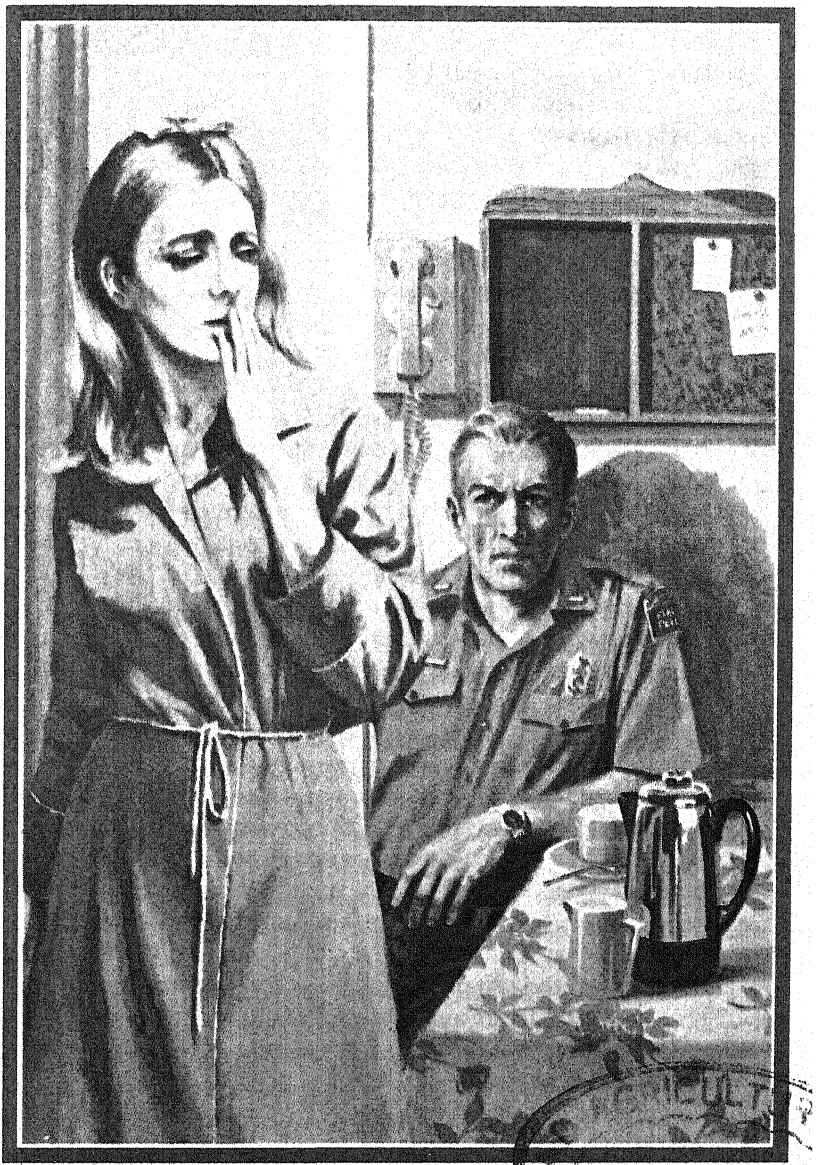
Red grinned at her. "Did you and Billie have fun last night?"

"You know Billie," she replied scornfully. "The perennial belle of the ball. Doesn't have any fun unless three or four boys are slobbering over her. But the picnic was neat." Myra examined her father covertly. "Daddy? Guess what?"

"Tell me, so I won't have to guess," Red said.

"I'll bet you don't know where most of my crowd is going this weekend." Myra paused for maximum effect. "Pine Lodge Lake."

Red Martin had no intention of letting her go to the festival. He knew that most of the kids would be on drugs, and many would wander around nude. He faced the issue without hesitation.


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"You're spending the weekend with your grandparents at the Cape."

Myra recognized the hard note in his voice and lacked the courage to look at him. "The Zeppelin Five are going to be there, and so are the Tombstones—it's their first live appearance in the United States. I was wondering if I couldn't stay for just part of the weekend. Then I could join the family at Cape Cod."

"Just how would you get to the Cape?"

Myra's chin jutted forward. "Lots of kids hitch rides."

"Hitchhiking on highways is against the law in this state, Myra. You're the daughter of a trooper—"

"I know, I'm supposed to set an example." Tears filled Myra's eyes. "Daddy, I wish you did *anything* else for a living!"

He felt as though she had struck him across the face. "Are your friends' parents so rich and prominent that you're ashamed because your old man is just a cop? Is that it?"

"No, Daddy!" Myra stood up, tears streaming down her face. "You know I'm proud of *you*. But I hate what you do because I always feel so handcuffed!" She left the room.

On the short drive to headquarters Red tried to forget his unpleasant exchange with Myra. The day was off to a bad start. He left his cruiser in the space reserved for the troop commander, where the garage mechanic would pick it up to wash it.

A number of Teletype messages were piled on his desk, all signed CHANCE. One read: ALL PERSONNEL ASSIGNED TO DESK JOBS WILL MAKE THEMSELVES AVAILABLE FOR FIELD DUTY THIS WEEKEND. Another said: THE PREROGATIVE OF COMMISSIONED OFFICERS RE WEARING OF CIVILIAN CLOTHES IS WITHDRAWN FOR THIS WEEKEND. ALL EXCEPT THOSE ATTACHED TO DETECTIVE AND CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION DIVISIONS WILL WEAR UNIFORM ON DUTY AT ALL TIMES.

Sergeant Henry Cohen came in with the night log and saluted.

Red returned the salute. "Hartford is starting early today."

"That isn't all, Lieutenant. The commissioner's office telephoned a couple of minutes ago. There's a meeting of commissioned officers in the old man's office at 1:30."

"It's going to be a great weekend." Red took the logbook. "Anything warm on the shift?"

"Trooper Duncan picked up a guy doing almost a hundred on the pike while drunk. We have him downstairs."

"Assign someone to take him to court at 8:30 and book him. I'm going to have some breakfast."

The morning's menu was displayed beside the food counter in the mess hall, but Red did not even glance at it. "A slice of melon, please," he said to the chef, "and a couple of soft-boiled eggs."

He took his breakfast to a corner table, and he had just attacked his melon when a lean man with graying hair took a place at the table. Captain Arthur Daniels was field captain for District 4, and Troop R was one of the five troops he supervised. He and Red Martin were old and close friends.

"Bea is giving Emily a ring today," Daniels said. "She wants Em and the kids to come over for lunch and a swim."

"Great," Red said. "Em was really teed off last night because I can't go up to her folks' place over the weekend."

Daniels made no comment. Not even to a friend would he say that Emily ought to know better.

"Myra was kicking up her heels this morning, too," Red went on. "She asked if she could go to the Pine Lodge Lake festival."

Daniels nodded. "Myra is a good kid, Red. And innocent."

"I know. A lot of innocent kids are going to the festival. But they'll be a damn sight less innocent by the time it's over."

When they had finished breakfast, they walked together to Martin's office, where the captain closed the door and seated himself in an armchair. "I'm going into Winthrop this morning for a meeting with Chief Burke. His PD had a busy night."

"Oh?" Red knew this was not small talk.

"Brace yourself," his superior said. "Don't be surprised if Winthrop is the El Fatah riot target this weekend. Do you know Christ Church, Afro-American, near the city line?"

"Old place across from the Spooner Company mills?"

"That's it. The Winthrop PD uncovered an arms cache of eleven rifles in the graveyard there this morning. Army surplus M-Ones. They were rendered inoperative and left where they were."

Red nodded in approval. "Very neat."

"Burke's detective bureau is watching the place, and anybody

who comes for the rifles will be tailed. But that's the least of it. The informer swears there are two bigger caches in Winthrop, but he doesn't know where."

"CID has some good men trying to crack El Fatah in Winthrop," Red said, and reached for the telephone connecting him with central headquarters in Hartford. "CID, please." He handed the instrument to his superior.

"Give me Captain MacGregor. This is Captain Daniels." A look of disgust crossed the district supervisor's face. "Tell him to get back to me here." He slammed the telephone into its cradle. "They run a goddam country club up in Hartford! Here it is almost eight, and Mac isn't in yet!"

THE overcrowded headquarters of the Connecticut state police in Hartford was located in an aging stone building. Adjacent to it was another building, headquarters of a troop that provided the commissioner and his staff with a variety of services, among them a mess hall. Captain Max MacGregor guided Trooper Annie Kirkland to a table usually reserved for the commissioner, and placed her breakfast next to his. "The old man eats breakfast at home," MacGregor said, "so we'll have a little privacy."

Annie smiled. MacGregor's reputation for figuring every angle was well-founded.

"I have a job in mind for you, but I don't want you to accept it just because we need you."

Even before she knew the score, Annie thought, the CID chief was making it impossible for her to refuse. Perhaps he was the ugliest man in the state police force, with his pockmarked face, but he could be overwhelming when he turned on the charm.

"You'll have to be comfortable. And confident that you can bring it off." MacGregor devoured a mouthful of scrambled egg, then grinned at her. "Do you like rock music?"

She guessed Pine Lodge Lake immediately. "I can take it or leave it alone. Some groups are great, but most of the hard rock and acid rock is too far-out for me. Maybe I'm growing old."

"The important thing is that you know what you're hearing, and you can talk about it. Right?"

Annie nodded.

"As for growing old, you can knock off five years and tell people you're twenty-one. Anybody would buy that."

"Why do I want to convince anyone I'm twenty-one?"

"Cover identity. You know I'm assigning you to the rock festival. Don't look so wide-eyed."

Annie laughed.

"We're sending in several teams. Never mind how many. The less you know, the more effective you'll be—you and your partner. You know Trooper Whitman?"

"Of course." Gladys Whitman, also a registered nurse, had been a classmate of Annie's at the academy. She was black, and one of the most beautiful young women Annie had ever met.

"You're the glamour detail," Captain MacGregor said. "Ever try pot, Annie?"

"When I was in training at the hospital. It didn't do a thing for me. I thought it was boring."

"I'm not suggesting that you smoke it. But having it will give you greater authenticity."

"I can fake smoking it," Annie said. "I won't inhale."

"Well, you may find something of interest in the equipment that will be issued to you. And I've promoted some unorthodox things from CSBI." The Connecticut State Bureau of Investigation, a division of the state police, issued special equipment and prepared technical data in such areas as ballistics, blood analysis, and fingerprints.

"I'm going to be armed?" Annie was surprised. Undercover agents rarely carried weapons.

Captain MacGregor looked aggrieved. "I wouldn't let you and Whitman go to Pine Lodge Lake without adequate means of protection." He rose. "If you've finished your coffee, let's go."

When they reached his office MacGregor handed her a box. Annie pretended not to see two plastic bags of marijuana and a package of cigarette paper, but she immediately picked up a small automatic pistol that fitted the palm of her hand.

"It's a Japanese .22, and it's far more lethal than it looks," MacGregor told her. "Here's another little gadget. He handed her a

gold lipstick case which she opened with care. As nearly as she could see, it was an ordinary lipstick.

"Push that little button on the side," he said, "and be sure you aim the open lipstick end at the face of your opponent."

"Mace?"

"Yup."

As she was replacing the lipstick, she noticed one more item at the bottom of the box—a kit for bleaching one's hair.

MacGregor looked embarrassed. "There are things we can't ask you to do in the line of duty. But for your own protection it might be smart to dye your hair. You've been working with a lot of delinquent girls, and some of them could show up at the festival."

The captain's suggestion made sense. "I'll let you know," Annie said, "whether all you hear about blondes is really true."

He cleared his throat. "We'll have a used knapsack for you, but we've no clothes."

"I can manage that myself, sir. When do you want us to go?"

MacGregor leaned back in his creaking swivel chair. "Some kids will start drifting in today. This afternoon the two of you will be dropped off on the turnpike, near Winthrop, and you can hitch the last ten or fifteen miles. By the way, nobody except Lieutenant Martin will know about your assignment, so if you get picked up for hitchhiking or vagrancy, you'll be on your own."

"Thanks a bunch, Captain." Annie smiled. "Maybe you're saving the best for last, but you haven't told me my assignment."

"You and Whitman have only one assignment: to identify drug pushers and observe them making sales. You'll need solid evidence to testify in court. You are to leave the festival at least two hours before the big crowds do, in order to point out the pushers as they go. And be careful. After the big haul we made at Powder Ridge, the pushers will know we have operatives inside."

AN HOUR after most of the boarders had gone off to work, a series of taps sounded at Lindsay Northrup's door—three delayed, then three more in quick succession. Clad only in a pair of ragged undershorts, he went to the door and unbolted it.

Trooper Joe Borden, somewhat less than distinguished in a torn

sport shirt, stained jeans, and dilapidated sandals, wasted no time. Closing the door, he said, "I just talked to Hartford. The Winthrop PD is onto something big." He described the arms cache found in the church graveyard a few hours earlier. "The brass thinks Winthrop may be the main target this weekend. So they want us to get confirmation. By tonight if possible."

"That chick Diane scoured my room last night," Lindsay said. "I think she'll give me clearance, and if she does, I stand a good chance of being invited to the meeting of the El Fatah high command tonight. So Hartford will have to hang in there."

"Hartford can't even spell patience. The commissioner is meeting with all his senior officers this afternoon."

Lindsay pulled on his shirt and dungarees. "If El Fatah gets away with a major disruption this weekend, they'll go national. They could start a civil war if they create enough panic."

"And who will stop them?" Joe asked. "Lindsay Northrup, heroic young trooper. And his faithful follower, Joe Borden."

"Man, we'll get promotions to detective. Maybe sergeant."

Joe Borden looked disgusted. "Sergeant? Would you want to spend the next ten years sitting at a desk shuffling papers?"

"You bet I would," Lindsay said. "All I want is to climb into uniform and walk down John Winthrop Boulevard, so everybody will know I'm a trooper and proud of it."

IT WAS inevitable that the state police executive officer and the chief of operations should be known as Mutt and Jeff by their nine hundred troopers. Lieutenant Colonel Merrill Craven was a tall, slender man of fifty. Major Emil Schneider was short and plump, and he sported one of the department's few mustaches. Together they formed the backbone of the headquarters staff in Hartford, Craven supervising day-to-day activities, Schneider directing detailed field operations.

They sat side by side now in the commissioner's modestly furnished office, waiting for him to complete a telephone conversation with the Massachusetts director of public safety. Commissioner Chance saw them gaze with distaste at his shabby drapes and old rug. At the first opportunity, he knew, they would lecture him

again about refurnishing his office. Yet when members of the legislature saw his surroundings, they were more inclined to be sympathetic toward requests for additional appropriations.

Chance put down the telephone. "Massachusetts has offered us a couple of hundred men if things get out of hand with El Fatah," he told his subordinates, "but I've turned them down."

Mutt and Jeff exchanged glances.

"Commissioner," Schneider said in his most military manner, "we'll be spreading ourselves even thinner than you know. The Detective Division has picked up a rumor there's going to be a motorcycle-gang war Saturday in Chestnut."

"That makes three volcanoes rumbling in the Troop R area." The commissioner smiled.

It was Colonel Craven's function to interpret his superior's cryptic comments. "You mean we won't be forced to transfer personnel very far if all the action occurs in the Troop R zone?"

"Exactly." The commissioner helped himself to a cigar from a humidor on his desk. "As to my refusal of help—I honestly believe we can handle anything that comes up. And think of the effect on the legislature—the public—when we pull it off!"

Major Schneider scowled. "We'll be stretched to the limit. Even if nothing develops, we've got to rely on the cooperation of local PDs." The commissioner didn't work with local police departments on a day-to-day basis, and was spared the frustrations of doing business with well-meaning forces of six to a dozen men. "I have less faith in some of them than you do, sir."

"All we'll ask is that they keep their own houses clean over the weekend, without requesting emergency assistance. Have your lieutenant call every local PD in the state, and suggest they cancel leaves, too. They'll want to know what kind of trouble we're expecting, but I'd rather not give details. The towns are inclined to leak information, and the governor would be upset if the public should get frightened unnecessarily."

"Okay, Commissioner," Schneider said. "Anything else?"

"Yes. Make your plans on a basis of expecting the worst. Assign every available trooper to mobile reserve pools under the command of field captains. We'll decide later where to station them.

That leaves just one question. Should we give Art Daniels the direct command in Troop R's zone?"

Colonel Craven raised a thick eyebrow. "Are you thinking of superseding Red Martin?"

"He could serve as Captain Daniels' deputy."

"My feeling," Major Schneider said, "is that we should let Martin keep control in his own house. Even though he and Art are friends, he would resent it if we gave a field captain his area."

"Have it your way," the commissioner said. "If even half the trouble we're anticipating should develop, I'll be spending the weekend in Troop R's zone myself, and so will just about every other senior officer on the force."

TROOPER Karl Roebish sat at a battered typewriter in the dayroom of the Troop R barracks, painfully filling in another of the reports that were the bane of every state policeman's existence. He needed the practice, so he didn't really resent Duncan's unloading the assignment on him. Karl should have been off duty at 8:00 a.m., but it was 10:00 now, and he was just finishing the last form.

The duty sergeant took the sheaf Karl handed him. "The boss wants to see you before you leave," he said.

Karl walked down the corridor to Lieutenant Martin's office and tapped on the glass door panel. Red Martin waved him in. Karl's salute was far snappier than that of the veterans, and Lieutenant Martin hid a smile. "You've been working late," he said.

"Yes, sir. Making out forms."

Duncan had no business shoving off his responsibilities on Karl, but Red had no intention of discussing that with a new trooper. "I'm sure you realize I can't okay overtime on this. It was your own doing to stay past quitting time."

Karl said, "I'd never put in for overtime, Lieutenant."

"When you legitimately work more than your forty-hour week, put in for it," Red said. He wondered how long it would be before Karl would gripe like all the others at a long week.

The door opened suddenly, and a young woman in shorts and a sleeveless cotton sweater walked in. Karl's immediate reaction was that she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen; her

figure was stunning, her red hair tumbled in waves down her back, and her green eyes were the color of a mountain lake.

"Hi, Daddy," Billie Martin said, as she crossed to her father's desk and bent to kiss him.

At that moment the telephone rang. "Lieutenant Martin," Red said, then put his hand over the mouthpiece. "The commissioner is calling. Billie, go have a cup of coffee with Trooper Roebish."

Karl felt his heart pounding as he held the door open for the girl. "You don't have to come with me," he said.

Billie halted, and her eyes held his a long second. "I know," she said, "but I think I want to."

Billie glanced at the nameplate above Karl's breast pocket. "Roebish. I don't think I've heard your name before."

"I reported for duty less than a week ago," he said.

Everybody in the mess hall seemed to know her. A detective in civvies waved to her, the civilian dispatcher called her name, and a pair of troopers just in from patrol duty spoke to her.

Karl cleared his throat. "Could I get you something to eat?"

Billie walked to the counter with him. "No, thanks, but you go ahead. You'll want some supper before you turn in."

He blinked. "How did you know—"

"Easy. You need a shave, and—well, you have the look of a man who has been working all night." She poured coffee for them.

He ordered, then sat with her, waiting for his food. "You don't need to rub your face," Billie told him. "I don't think anyone else would notice that you haven't shaved for hours."

"You see things that other people don't."

"So my father tells me. He says I'd be a first-rate detective, but one policeman in the family is enough. Sugar and cream?"

Karl nodded, then said, "I see you don't use either."

"I don't want to get fat."

"Fat? You?" He had become too personal too soon, he thought, and felt the color rise to his face.

Billie gave him a friendly smile. "All I have to do is look at something rich, and I put on five pounds. Men don't have that trouble." Her glance seemed to indicate an appreciation of his physique. "What made you want to become a trooper?"

"The usual reasons."

"My father has always said that men join for different reasons. Some like the authority, and some the security."

Karl pondered for a moment. "I don't think either has ever appealed to me particularly," he said. "What really got me, I guess, was wanting to pitch in. There's a big job to be done in law enforcement, especially in the preventive field."

Her gaze was steady. "What would you do if the kids of our generation started calling you a pig? You're the enemy, you know."

"I'd try to convince them they've got it wrong, and that we're really on the same side."

"Suppose," Billie persisted, "they wouldn't listen?"

"Then they'd have to learn the hard way."

"You really mean it!" Impulsively she placed a hand on his arm, then withdrew it.

"I'm not much of a flag-waver," he said. "I disapproved of the war in Vietnam and I hated every minute I spent there. But there was a job to be done there, too. If everybody refuses to accept responsibility, we'll have anarchy."

Billie glanced at him, then looked away. "You have guts."

Karl took a deep breath. "Could I interest you in a hamburger and an early movie tonight? I mean, I'm reporting for duty at midnight, so we'd have to start—"

"I know, and I'd love to." She had always sworn she would never date a state trooper, and she was surprised at herself.

"Great," Karl said. If Lieutenant Martin disapproved of his daughter going out with a rookie, it could mean the end of Karl's career. But he discovered that he didn't care what the lieutenant thought. All he knew was that he wanted to see this girl again.

Billie looked at the wall clock and rose. "Why don't you come by at 6:30?" He stood up and returned her farewell smile, then watched as she disappeared down the hall.

When Billie returned to her father's office she slumped in an overstuffed chair and said, "Tell me about Trooper Roebish."

"What would you like to know?" Red asked casually.

"His first name, for one thing. When I date a boy I always like to call him by name."

"Karl." He paused for a moment. "You've made a date?"

"Tonight. Early movie."

"I'm not sure which of you was the fast worker, but I'd have sworn it wasn't Roebish." He chuckled. "Don't tell me you stopped in because you had a yen to go out with one of my men."

"I almost forgot." The girl moved forward to the edge of her chair. "I guess you know Mom is tearing the house apart because you've been stuck with duty this weekend."

Red's mouth set in a tight line. "I had an inkling last night of things to come."

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I know Mom's hang-ups. Especially when it has to do with your work."

Red turned away and stared out the window at the barracks parking lot. No matter how difficult his marriage had become, he would not discuss Emily with one of their children.

"Mom says she isn't going up to the Cape without you."

A look of annoyance crossed his face. "That's a lot of damned nonsense," he growled. "I'll call Mother before I go up to Hartford to see the commissioner." Speaking with care, he added, "I don't suppose you know what she hopes to accomplish by staying home for the weekend."

Her laugh was harsh. "When Mom goes into one of her rages, I don't stick around and ask questions." She saw that her father was hurt. Perhaps she had said too much. She rose, then patted his shoulder.

THE numbers parlor was crowded, the heat was stifling, and cigarette smoke had turned the air blue. But the men and women who stood patiently on two long lines, clutching dollar bills, did not seem to notice. They were there to bet on the numbers or the races, to dream of vast sums that would transform their wretched worlds. The Winthrop Police Department had refrained from padlocking this place only because Lindsay Northrup and other undercover operatives found it useful as a headquarters.

The line inched forward as the bookie telephoned in the bets, and Lindsay shuffled along with it. At times like this, when the despair around him was a suffocating blanket, it was all too easy

to pretend he was an aimless drifter regularly playing the horses.

When his turn came he placed a two-dollar bet on each of three horses and started to worm through the crowd. A hand reached inside the bottom of his shirt and slid up his bare back. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the platinum wig, and grinned. "I been lookin' for you for an hour, man," Diane said.

She waited until they reached the street. "Andy Lennox sent me," she said. "He don't like you, but some of his friends got a better opinion of you, so he says to tell you you're invited to the old church across from the mill that went out of business last year."

"I know the place." Lindsay felt a ringing in his ears.

"Be there at two o'clock sharp. Andy says you're to come alone, and you better not have anybody followin' you."

"Who in hell would want to do that?" Joe had taken the morning off to visit an ailing relative, and Lindsay would have to try to find him in time to work out a surveillance system.

Diane hesitated, then moved close and spoke in a whisper. "Rosey, don't ask me no questions, but listen good to what I tell you. When you go to that meetin', man, watch your step!"

THE telephone call to Emily had been a complete waste, Red Martin told himself. She had informed him that she and the girls were on their way to join Bea Daniels for a swim. If he insisted, she would tell him this evening why she had changed her weekend plans. He would insist, he thought. His marriage had been falling apart long enough; time for a showdown.

He carefully avoided any mention of Emily to Art Daniels as they drove together to Hartford for the commissioner's meeting. He and his field captain had been friends for the entire nineteen years he had been a state trooper. But it was pointless to let the Martin dirty linen spill over onto another family.

The parking lot at state police headquarters was crowded. Inside the small auditorium, captains and lieutenants sat chatting in little groups. The commissioned officers who commanded the state police regarded themselves as members of an exclusive fraternity, united by pride in the extraordinary law-enforcement organization they and their predecessors had forged.

Commissioner Chance came down the aisle, followed by Colonel Craven and Major Schneider, and the officers stood until they reached the podium. The commissioner waved his subordinates to their seats, Mutt and Jeff taking their places behind him on the platform. Then, resting an elbow on the lectern, he addressed them all in a conversational tone.

"Gentlemen, this weekend we're going to earn our pay. We're guessing that fifty thousand young people will show up at Pine Lodge Lake. Anything can happen there. If our advance information is correct, a motorcycle-gang war may break out in Chestnut. There is also a strong possibility that El Fatah may stage a power demonstration in Winthrop.

"Let me deal with these situations one at a time. Our operations at Powder Ridge in 1970 offer us a splendid precedent for Pine Lodge Lake, which we intend to follow. Let me emphasize that I am rejecting requests from some misguided citizens for this department to use force—gas, clubs, whatever—to prevent the festival from taking place. We must assume that most of the youngsters are decent kids, and not treat them as the enemy. As long as they are orderly, our intervention would be illegal and unjustified.

"Experience has taught us that drugs will be used in large quantities. More important, from our point of view, they will be sold. If we send uniformed officers into the festival site to arrest drug pushers, however, we'll be giving the crowd an excuse to riot. Captain MacGregor, we'd like to hear your plans."

The CID chief walked to the podium. "I'm sending twenty-two undercover agents into the festival site. They'll report regularly by telephone and shortwave radio to a command post outside the grounds. Some will purchase drugs from pushers, while others photograph the transactions. However, no on-the-spot arrests will be made. By waiting until the festival ends and arresting the pushers as they leave, we can make a far bigger haul. We had only sixteen undercover people at Powder Ridge, and we made seventy-two arrests, all of which resulted in convictions."

As MacGregor returned to his seat, the commissioner said, "If Captain Fowler of the Emergency Services Division will come up now, he can explain our riot-control preparations."

George Fowler, whose spectacles made him look like a college professor, made his way to the lectern. "We're ready for just about anything, including El Fatah," he said. "All three of my tanks are set for action, and we've increased our supply of gas canisters for the big guns. I'd like all troop commanders to check the state of riot-control equipment—helmets, gas masks, Mace guns—issued to their troopers, and report any shortages to my office by 9:00 a.m. tomorrow. All eight of our vans have been stocked with howitzers and rifles, and these will be issued to your men at the scene of any disturbance. If you see a serious confrontation developing, get me on the radio at once."

A lieutenant raised his hand. "Will troop commanders have the authority to request tank support, Captain?"

Commissioner Chance returned to the lectern. "I'll answer that. We'll send tanks into the streets only if an otherwise uncontrollable confrontation has developed. I'm reserving the right to order out the tanks to myself and Colonel Craven."

Red Martin shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The mental picture of tanks rumbling down John Winthrop Boulevard made him queasy. It would be a miracle if serious bloodshed were avoided over the Labor Day weekend. Somehow he'd have to persuade Emily to go up to the Cape with the girls until Monday night.

THE face that stared at Annie Kirkland from the mirror was that of a total stranger, and it wasn't just the blond hair. Mascara and eyeliner completed the transformation. Her sleazy sun bra was a size too small, as were her shorts, which emphasized her firm buttocks. As she drew on her sandals it occurred to her that her feet were too clean. But that should remedy itself by the time she and Gladys Whitman had hitchhiked to Pine Lodge Lake.

Packing her knapsack with care, Annie stashed away the plastic bags of marijuana and wrapped two clean pairs of panties around the tiny, transistorized walkie-talkie that CSBI had issued her late that morning. Finally she slipped an ammunition clip into the little Japanese .22 automatic, and stuffed it and the lipstick Mace into the pockets of her shorts. She picked up her knapsack and bedroll and went downstairs.

Pat Dyer glanced up from the soap opera she was watching, then froze. "You aren't going out looking like that! Is that a wig?"

"No, I've dyed my hair." Annie walked to the television set and turned it off. "I can't explain, Pat, so save your breath. I won't be home until Monday night at the earliest, maybe Tuesday morning, and I won't be able to get in touch with you during that time. If something terribly urgent happens, you can reach me through Troop R headquarters."

There were tears in Pat's eyes. "I can't imagine the state police asking you to get yourself up like a streetwalker."

Annie kept a straight face. "Not a streetwalker," she said. "Girls of the type I'm impersonating give it away free."

They heard a car pull into the driveway, and both went to the window. The handsome trooper behind the wheel of the unmarked vehicle looked vaguely familiar. She thought she had seen him at the Troop R barracks once or twice in recent days. Beside him was a breathtakingly attractive black girl. Gladys Whitman's hair had been dyed red, and her false eyelashes emphasized her enormous eyes.

"That girl," Pat said, "is a floozy, too—and a black, at that. Suppose the neighbors see you!"

"Tell them I've gone to pot," Annie said, and laughed as she walked out of the house.

Karl Roebish looked at her, eyes bulging. "Trooper Kirkland?"

"The same." Annie opened the door on the passenger's side. "Hello, beautiful. Move over."

"Hi, gorgeous." Gladys grinned. "They never taught us this at the academy."

Both girls laughed, and Karl's discomfort became greater. They were the first undercover agents he had encountered, and he hadn't expected them to look like trollops. He devoutly hoped he wouldn't pass Billie Martin on the road.

The girls paid him no attention as they went through verbal checklists. "Automatic pistol," Annie said. "I've got mine."

"Same here," Gladys replied. "Walkie-talkie."

"Check. Lipstick Mace."

"Mine is a compact," Gladys said. "What about money?"

"I'm carrying twenty dimes for phone calls to Captain MacGregor, and not another penny."

"Then I guess I'm the banker. I've got five hundred dollars in fifties, all marked and photographed by CID."

"Where are you carrying them?"

"The heels of my sandals are hollow. Captain MacGregor thinks of everything."

Karl tried to hide his astonishment as he drove onto the turnpike and increased his speed. Annie knew he was a rookie and sympathized with his embarrassment. "Be glad that Captain MacGregor didn't dig his hooks into you for an assignment this weekend," she said.

"I guess I'm too green."

"Lucky," Annie told him. "Max loves to requisition new people, and when he does, you can be stuck in CID forever."

Karl left the turnpike, drove a short distance on a two-lane asphalt road, and drew to a halt. The girls climbed out of the car. "Wish us luck," Gladys said.

"The best—to both of you." He watched them disappear over the crest of a hill, and marveled at their calm. Neither of them seemed in the least concerned about her personal safety.

After donning oversized sunglasses, the two girls strolled to a sharp bend in the road which would force drivers to slow down. Several cars passed them by, then Annie thumbed down a battered convertible. Two young men and a girl sat in the front seat, two other men occupied the rear. All had long hair. They looked promising. "Pine Lodge Lake!" she shouted.

The car pulled to a stop. "That's where we're headed," the driver called. "Join the party!"

Gladys squeezed into the middle place in the rear seat, which left Annie to settle for one of the two laps on either side. The rattling of the car made it difficult to converse. Everyone seemed to be shouting simultaneously, and whenever the car shot around a curve, all three girls were enthusiastically embraced.

The young man on whose lap Annie was sitting was called Duke. "I've got a couple of quarts of gin," he shouted in her ear. "We can have a real party tonight!"

She only smiled at him, knowing she and Gladys would have to drop this group. Drinkers rarely took any drugs stronger than pot, and the girls' instructions had been to ferret out hard-drug addicts.

LINDSAY Northrup tried not to let his concern show as he trudged through the Winthrop ghetto toward the Afro-American church. He had waited as long as he had dared for Joe Borden to reappear, and then had started out alone, though it was contrary to regulations. He couldn't miss this chance to get inside El Fatah.

The abandoned Spooner mills loomed directly ahead, the plant yard littered with beer cans and other rubbish. Lindsay would have bet that the Winthrop PD had stationed detectives armed with cameras in the place, and that they were snapping everyone approaching the church. To make the task easier for them, he paused, looking up at the open windows on the second floor.

The El Fatah high command was taking no chances. Guards with suspicious bulges under their shoulders were stationed at both entrances to the old church. A heavyset man with a wispy beard seemed to be in charge at the main entrance, and his voice was hard as he peered at Lindsay. "Who are you?"

"Roosevelt Northrup. I've been doing runner duty."

"His name is on my list," a second man declared.

"He's okay," said a third. "Pass him in."

Lindsay blinked when he heard the voice of the third man, and a quick glance confirmed that Joe Borden was very much on top of the situation. Obviously Joe had found his own way of ingratiating himself with the organization's leadership, and had been given the post of doorkeeper.

The pews on the ground floor were filled. Lindsay made his way to the choir loft and found the only vacant place in the first row overlooking the chamber below. About twenty-five of the leaders sat on a dais facing the audience. All wore green armbands over their rough work clothes. About a third of them were distinguished by their shaved heads, and these sat in the front row, indicating that they were the ruling council. So the top leaders could be identified instantly, a nugget of information that would be useful when the time came to crack down on El Fatah.

The majority of the leaders seemed to be in their late twenties and early thirties. The men in the audience directly below the choir loft were even younger. Appearing awed by the gathering, they sat silently, staring ahead.

The doors were closed, and the guards took up places below the pulpit, facing the audience. Then one of the shaved heads opened the meeting. Ordering everyone to rise, he commanded the assemblage to repeat a mumbo-jumbo creed which he called the Solemn Oath of Fidelity and Brotherhood. After that he wasted no words. "The day," he said, "will be Saturday. The place will be—right here, Winthrop. H hour will be high noon. The brothers will start coming in from all over the country by tomorrow. The pigs are snooping their fool heads off, so be careful. If strangers ask questions, keep your mouths shut. Our actions will speak for us when we take over Winthrop—and show every man, woman, and child in the United States that we mean business!"

He was roundly cheered when he took his seat.

The shaved head who replaced him had a knife strapped to his inner forearm. "Some of you have been bugging me, wanting your weapons," he said. "Well, brothers, we got them hidden away and you got to be patient until Saturday. Report at your usual cell meeting places an hour before H hour. Your firearms will be issued to you then, and your cell leaders will give you instructions."

He, too, was applauded when he returned to his seat.

Suddenly a big man in the audience heaved himself to his feet. Lindsay recognized him as Andy Lennox. "Brothers," he shouted, "it's my doin' that one man is with us today, but I've got cold feet about him. He's heard too much already, and I don't think we ought to let him hear any more. I got me a notion he's a pig spy!" A thick forefinger jabbed in the direction of the choir loft.

Lennox was pointing directly at Lindsay. People craned to stare at him, and there was a low, menacing rumble. Lindsay had no idea why Lennox now suspected him, after granting him permission to attend the meeting, but he had to react quickly. He stood up and pointed at his accuser. Then, in a tone of deep contempt, he said, "Lennox, *you're* the pig spy! Not me! There are men in this church who grew up with me, right here in Winthrop. We

went to school together, we snitched things to eat from grocery stores together. They'll stand up for me!"

"Right on!" someone shouted. "Rosey Northrup is all right!"

Lindsay was not finished with his opponent. "You want to know why the big boy is making up dirty damn lies about me? Because his girl likes me better than him! Man, this is no way to get back your chick. Go practice your lovin' somewhere else—and then show her you're better than I am!"

A roar of laughter filled the old church.

One of the shaved heads stood up. "Fight over your damn women some other time!"

Lindsay sat down. The immediate danger had passed. The meeting lasted a few more minutes; then the men were dismissed.

Lindsay started toward his rooming house. He had walked only a block before he knew he was being followed. He paused in front of a store window, and saw in the reflection that two men had also stopped about fifty paces behind him. Still farther to the rear, Joe Borden was maintaining his own surveillance.

As Lindsay entered the house he turned and let his gaze drift casually over the pair who were tailing him. Both were friends of Lennox's; evidently the big boy had not given up the fight. For the next half hour they loitered outside the rooming house. Not until they finally departed did Joe Borden enter the building.

He closed the door of Lindsay's room behind him, and they looked at each other in silence for a moment. "Well," Joe remarked, "we've got just about all the information we need."

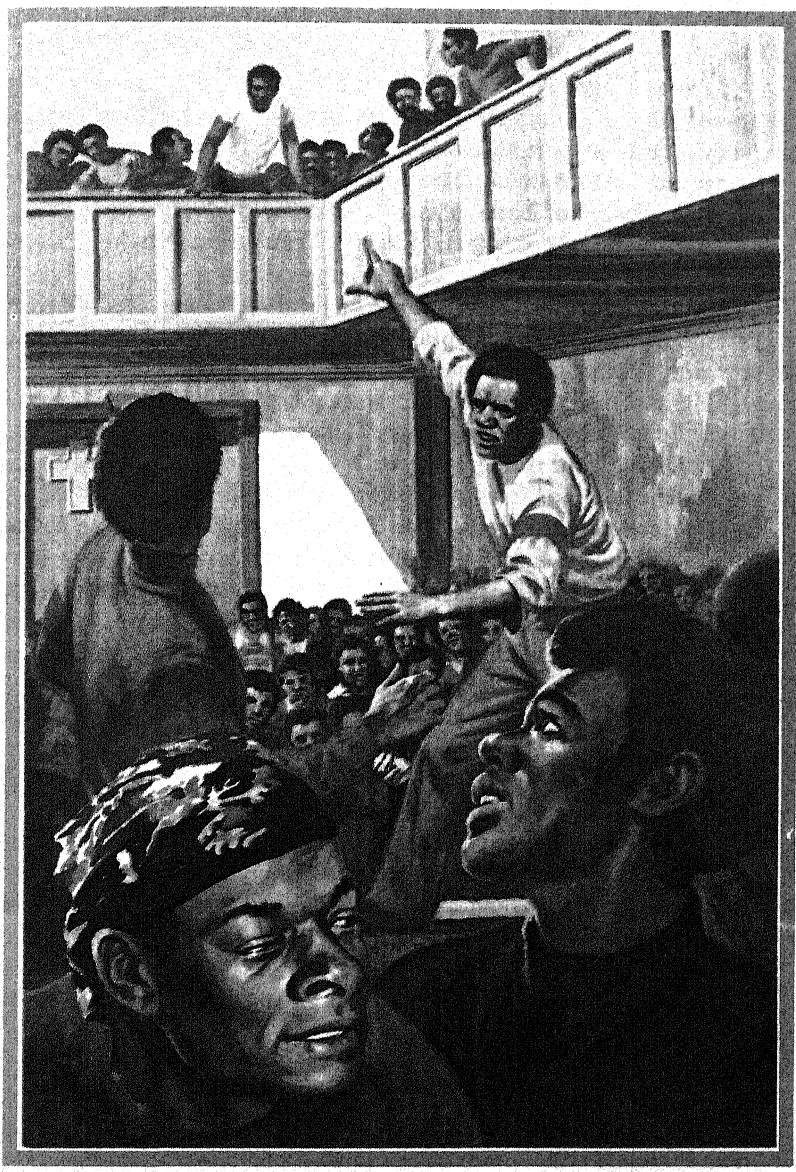
"If we could track down the heads of El Fatah, they could be picked up before Saturday noon," Lindsay replied. "But they'll get suspicious if they see me hanging around."

"I got that guard job on a fluke," Joe said. "I can't push my luck."

"Then we'd better report what we've learned so far. There's plenty they can do at headquarters with that."

"I'll do the reporting," Joe said. "Those two goons will be right on your heels again when you leave here. Sit tight until I get back, and start planning for a long journey this afternoon."

"I'm not going anywhere," Lindsay said.



"The hell you aren't! Lennox is really after a showdown. You won't be much use with a knife in your back."

"I'm staying here because I have no choice," Lindsay said. "Suppose I disappear; it will prove to El Fatah that I'm a cop, and they'll call off their action for Saturday. If I stick it out, which is what any innocent man would do, on Saturday the department can take every last leader of El Fatah into custody."

"I've got to hand it to you," Joe said. "You've got guts."

A VOICE on the squawk box caught Lieutenant Red Martin's attention as he and Captain Art Daniels were driving back toward Winthrop after their meeting with the commissioner.

"HQ to One R," the metallic voice said. "HQ to One R."

Red picked up his microphone. "This is One R, HQ."

"Is One D Four riding with you."

"He's right here."

"Proceed to your destination soonest, and then give us a ring. One HQ wants to talk to both of you."

Neither man spoke as Red raced to Troop R barracks and parked his car. The pair entered Red's office, where he dialed Commissioner Chance's extension on the direct Hartford line. "Make this a conference call," the commissioner's aide told them.

Red flipped a switch that would permit two or more persons to speak through a microphone built into his telephone. The commissioner came on the line. "Daniels, Martin—are you both there?"

"Yes, sir," they said in unison.

"We're onto something. Captain MacGregor has just had a report from two agents in Winthrop." Chance told them what Lindsay and Joe had learned about El Fatah's weekend plans. "I want you to take overall command, Art. The Winthrop PD can give us their full complement of 550 men, and the outlying towns can supply another 150. And you'll have 200 troopers. Who do you want to command them?"

"Red," the field captain replied without hesitation.

"Winthrop is in my district," Red added.

"You've been assigned the detachment at Pine Lodge Lake, Martin. How can you be in two places at once?" Chance asked.

"Give me a deputy at the festival, sir, and I'll transfer myself to Winthrop on Saturday morning."

"I approve, Commissioner," Art said.

"Very well. You understand that your plans must be made in the utmost secrecy. El Fatah must continue to believe we'll be surprised. There's one thing more. I've just spoken to the governor, and he's agreed that this entire operation will be strictly our baby. As a courtesy we'll notify the FBI and other federal agencies, and they can send in some agents to help us, if they wish. But we'll call the signals." The commissioner rang off.

IT WAS after 8:00 p.m. when Red Martin pulled into his driveway and parked his cruiser in the garage. Wearier than he would have admitted, he went into the house. "I'm home," he shouted, but there was no answer.

He was in the bedroom, having changed into sport shirt and slacks, when Emily came in. "I was down in the family room," she said, "and didn't hear you. You must be hungry. Myra and I had a bite, but I saved you some." She started toward the kitchen.

Her husband followed her. "Thanks. Where are the girls?"

"Billie went out with that young trooper—"

"I forgot," Red interrupted, and grinned. "Roebish will be a first-rate cop."

As they reached the kitchen Emily said, "I hate to have her start dating troopers. One of these days she's going to fall in love, and I'll be a lot happier if she picks a civilian."

Red went to the refrigerator. For the moment he had no intention of pursuing the subject. "Where did Myra go?"

"To a drive-in movie with some friends." She looked at the vodka and tonic he handed her. "I didn't really want this."

"Drink it anyway. It'll do you good." His own drink in hand, he wandered to the stove and sniffed appreciatively. "Don't tell me this is my favorite beef stew. Why the treat?"

"I thought if I could soothe the savage beast, there'd be less chance we'd quarrel tonight."

His grin felt as though it had been pasted on. He raised his glass in their private toast. "Here's to crime and corruption."

Reluctantly she took a sip of her drink.

Red sat down at the table. "Don't hurry the food, Em. Let's relax for a few minutes first."

Emily took a chair opposite him. "Let's get it over with."

"Okay." He hitched forward in his chair. "How come you've called off your plans to go up to the Cape?"

Emily sighed. "As much as I love my parents and my children, being a grass widow on a holiday doesn't turn me on."

"You ought to know how little we'll see each other here. Maybe I'll get home for a few hours of sleep, maybe not."

"I have no doubt you'll be busy. I knew you would be. I'm not expecting to see you—or even hear from you."

Regardless of the consequences, Red had promised himself he would clear the air. "It seems to me," he said, "that you're going out of your way to make me feel I'm a louse."

"The notion," Emily said, "has crossed my mind." For the first time she seemed to enjoy her drink.

"Even if I resigned my commission right this minute, you know, it wouldn't be accepted until after the weekend."

"I'm hardly asking you to give up your career, Harlow."

"The hell you aren't. You know damn well that a state trooper is on duty twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. I'm paid nearly eighteen thousand dollars a year to protect the people whose taxes provide my salary. As long as people break laws, somebody has to defend society!"

"And my husband elected himself to the job."

"Let's get this straight, Em. I have no intention of resigning. If I can qualify in the civil-service exams, there's another promotion ahead. I can look forward to as much as ten more years on duty—"

"Even that wouldn't satisfy you," Emily cut in. "The day you're made a captain you'll start bucking for major. And if you aren't made commissioner by some future governor, you'll go to your grave convinced you've been a failure."

Red was surprised to discover he agreed. "There's nothing wrong with healthy ambition."

"True. But I didn't really know, when I married you, that I was agreeing to love, honor, and cherish the Connecticut state police

until I die. If it hadn't been for the girls, I'd have presented you with an ultimatum years ago: take me or your precious job. But I'm not so sure, now, that the girls need either of us anymore, so the time has come for us to decide whether or not we want to stay married. And I know of no better time than this weekend—when we may not even see each other—to make up our minds."

LINDSAY Northrup stretched out on his sagging bed and went over his situation. He had no illusions regarding his fate if he were exposed. He would feel far more comfortable if he had a .38 hidden away somewhere. Perhaps it was Joe's temporary absence that was making him jittery, but he promised himself that if he survived this weekend, he would apply for a transfer to a barracks.

A light tap sounded at the door.

"Who's there?" Lindsay called.

"Diane. I got to see you, baby." She sounded disturbed.

Lindsay hesitated; then he rose and unbolted the door. It opened and Diane catapulted into him. Obviously she had been shoved, for the huge bulk of Andy Lennox loomed in the doorframe.

Lennox closed the door behind him. "I knew you'd be too yellow to open up for me," he said as he waved the girl into a corner.

"No rough stuff, Andy," she whimpered. "You promised."

Lindsay eyed him contemptuously. "What do you want?"

"You insulted me today in front of my brothers." Lennox stood with his feet apart, his fists clenched. "They're laughin' all over town, sayin' you took my chick away from me."

Lindsay made the mistake of glancing at the girl, who was pressing herself against the far wall. In that instant Lennox lashed out at him, the huge fist crashing against his cheekbone, and Lindsay dropped to one knee. Lennox sprang forward, bringing his other fist down on top of Lindsay's head. Then he snatched a switchblade from his sleeve.

Lindsay had been prepared to take a beating for the sake of protecting his cover, but the weapon altered the situation. He would have to try out for real the techniques he had learned at the academy. As Lennox came at him, he stood and braced himself. An accurate karate kick caught the big man's wrist and sent

the knife spinning across the floor. A second kick landed in the pit of Lennox's stomach and doubled him over.

While Lennox gasped for breath and tried to straighten his body, Lindsay caught him with a sharp karate chop to the side of the neck. Lennox tried to strike back, fists flailing, but Lindsay delivered another kick in the stomach which sent the El Fatah strongman pitching forward. The edge of Lindsay's hand slashed into his Adam's apple, and he toppled to the floor. "Get out of here before I hurt you," Lindsay said, picking up the knife.

Lennox hauled himself up, then staggered to the door, which Lindsay opened. "Stay away from me, big boy," he said. "I've got no quarrel with you, so save all that mean feeling for the enemy."

Lennox lurched off down the dimly lighted corridor. Lindsay turned to the girl, who was gaping at him with admiration. "Go with him. He may need some help." He handed her the closed knife. "Give this back to Lennox for me. Then he'll know I don't bear him a grudge."

"I'll be back, baby," she said, and hurried off. Lindsay watched her, feeling a stab of pity for all the ruined lives she stood for. The poverty and ignorance of the ghetto, combined with a face and body that had lured men since she was little more than a child, had set the mold. No wonder so many were eager to accept the utopian promises of lunatic-fringe organizations like El Fatah.

THEY sat on the sundeck of the Chestnut Beach pavilion, overlooking Long Island Sound, ordered another round of hamburgers and Cokes, and grinned at each other. "You're making me feel guilty," Karl Roebish said. "I asked you to a movie."

"If you really want to see a movie," Billie Martin said, "it will be okay with me."

"I'm just thinking of you. I like it fine right here."

"Me, too."

Karl picked up the thread of their conversation. "You wouldn't believe how many girls are turned off when they find out you're a state trooper. When I was trying to get into the academy, girls found excuses to stop seeing me."

"What do you think it's like being a trooper's daughter? Half

the kids in my class at high school thought of me as the enemy. Even at college there are some who treat me like a leper."

"How do you handle them?"

"I don't," she said. "Anybody stupid enough to snub me because I'm some kind of symbol isn't worth bothering with."

"That's the way I feel. I wouldn't say this to many people, but I'm proud of being a trooper. Sure, to be 'in' these days, you've got to be a cop hater. But as the kids of our generation settle into jobs and get married and have children they want the same security that people have demanded for years. That's when the police begin to assume a place of importance in their lives."

Billie pondered as she stared out at the waves. Karl thought she was the prettiest, most intelligent girl he had ever known.

"But you said yourself you wouldn't tell just anybody that you're proud of being a trooper," Billie said.

"If I've kept quiet around a lot of people, it's because they're still emotionally immature."

She smiled. "I know what you mean. I've always been proud of my father, but I'm sure my little sister—she's only sixteen—is secretly ashamed of the way he earns his living. She was disgusted with me when she heard I had a date with you tonight."

They reached for the ketchup container at the same moment. "I hope," Karl said, placing his hand over hers, "that you aren't sorry you accepted."

Billie made no attempt to free her hand. "Do I look sorry?"

He was too self-conscious to answer, so she went on. "What I mean is that if my sister feels that way, how can you expect anything more intelligent from the rest of the generation?"

"I see encouraging signs," he said. "All the smaller children of our neighborhood swarm around my cruiser every day. They want to see my handcuffs, my gun, my hat. Take my word for it, those youngsters have a real respect for a state trooper."

"You make me feel better," Billie said.

"I'm glad." He glanced at his watch. "We still have a couple of hours before I report for duty. Let's take a stroll up the beach."

Neither felt a need to converse as they slowly made their way on the hard-packed sand, fingers intertwined.

III

THURSDAY

CHIEF Tom Bowers of Chestnut was one of the youngest of the local police chiefs who attended the meeting at the Troop R barracks. Art Daniels introduced him, saying, "Now that we've covered the general weekend situation, Tom Bowers has an itch to talk about motorcycle gangs."

"I'm running scared," Bowers began. "I'm damned if I want a gang rumble in a city of forty thousand people. A lot of them might get hurt."

"How would you like to operate, Chief?" Art Daniels asked.

"Well, sir, we don't know if the rival gangs have chosen a spot for their fight, or whether they'll go hunting for each other. It seems to me that I can avoid a war in the streets by stationing units of fifteen to twenty-five uniformed men in a number of locations around town where they'll be sure to be seen."

Daniels exchanged a glance with Major Schneider, who had come down from Hartford for the meeting. "The trouble with that idea, Chief, is that you'll be spreading yourself thin at a time when we're going to need all our manpower."

Red Martin cut in. "Do I understand that you want to run the gangs out of town when they show up, Chief?"

"Sure, Lieutenant."

"That's the hole in your plan. Force them out of Chestnut and they'll tangle somewhere else, possibly in a smaller town that lacks the police muscle to handle them."

"How would you deal with this rumpus on Saturday, Lieutenant?" Captain Daniels asked.

"I believe," Red said, "that we can turn the trick with six Chestnut patrolmen and two troopers. Station a patrolman near the city line on each of the six main roads. The patrolman who spots the out-of-town gang coming in, radios ahead. Then, before the two gangs meet, send a state trooper to intercept each of them."

"Aw, come off it!" Bowers said. "How could two troopers handle a hundred or more young toughs who are out for blood?"

"A trooper is notified that a gang is moving up Route 386, for instance," Red said. "He parks his cruiser so it creates a roadblock. Then he dismounts to meet them—accompanied by an attack dog. Not even the wildest of those punks will want to tangle with an armed trooper and one of our big shepherds. The rest is up to the trooper. He'll persuade them to go home, take a swim in the Sound, drink a little beer to cool off."

"Suppose they won't listen to him?" Bowers demanded.

"Then he can radio ahead to your central office, and you can dispatch your mobile reserve. If they've defied him, we'll have ample grounds to take them into custody as violators of the peace."

Major Schneider moved to the podium. "The plan is sound and has my approval," he said. "We'll proceed as outlined."

"You'd better get downstairs to your own room." Joe Borden, who was looking out of his lodging-house window, turned quickly to his partner. "You have some callers. Andy Lennox. And a bald-headed character from the El Fatah inner circle."

Lindsay Northrup hurried down the rickety stairs to his room, and was stretched out on his bed, poring over a racing form, when a tap sounded at the door. "Who's there?" he called.

"Big boy. Open up, man."

Lindsay took his time as he went to the door and unbolted it. "Lennox," he said, opening the door a few inches, "if you and I don't stop feuding, somebody is going to get hurt bad."

"I ain't here to fight." Lennox pushed into the room. His companion followed and favored Lindsay with a curt nod.

"I was telling our friend here how you cleaned up on me last night," Lennox said. "He can't believe it was a fair fight."

"You bet it was," Lindsay said, "and I'll do it again if I have to."

The bald-headed man smiled. "Why don't we sit down?" It was an order, not a question.

Lennox obeyed at once. Lindsay sat on the end of the bed. "We got something special to talk over with you," Lennox said.

"Let me do the talking, please." The bald-headed man spoke haughtily. "Northrup, I like your style. It took guts to stand up to Lennox at our meeting. And no ordinary fighter could beat up

this ox. El Fatah needs men like you, so I'm here to recruit you for our elite corps—the guerrilla brothers. They're the shock troops who will lead our army in the battle on Saturday."

Andy Lennox raised his head, and his pride was evident. "I've been in the band for a long time."

"What would I be expected to do?" Lindsay asked.

"The band will get battle orders the same time everybody else gets them, just before we fight. You'll be given your weapons, and your part will be laid out for you."

"I appreciate the honor just fine," Lindsay said. "But what I'm wondering is what's in it for me. When the horses don't run right, you need more than glory to pay the rent."

To his surprise the man was highly pleased. "Northrup, you're our kind. The leaders of every army worth their salt get paid. After the fight, you'll get $250."

"That's okay." Lindsay pretended to think for a moment. "How's chances of getting my hands on some of that bread today?"

The man shook his head. "You might spend a little too much on liquor to be in shape for Saturday."

Lindsay looked disappointed. "Well, I guess the glory will have to do for now."

"You're being sensible, Northrup. If you had turned down my offer, you'd have been on a very warm spot." The man reached under his loose-fitting jacket and produced an expensive German-made pistol; attached to it was a silencer. Lindsay was taking more risks in his undercover assignment than he had bargained for, and the complications were beginning to snowball.

Trooper Karl Roebish was still sound asleep when his mother came into his room and gently shook his shoulder. "Sorry to wake you," she said, "but there's a phone call for you. The young lady introduced herself as Billie Martin."

Karl bolted out of bed and pulled on his old bathrobe as he sprinted down the hall to the telephone. He took a moment to control his breath, then picked up the phone. "Karl Roebish."

"Hi. This is Billie. I'm sorry to get you up on your day off."

"That's okay," Karl said. "I had plenty of sleep."

"The only reason I've called this early is because something important's come up. What I mean is—well, I need help."

"I'll do anything I can." He was overwhelmed that she was coming to him for assistance.

"Could you spare a little time today?" she said. "I was hoping you could pick me up around one o'clock."

Karl took command. "I'll be at your house at one sharp. Any special place you'd like to go?"

She hesitated. "Somewhere where we don't know many people. I'd rather not be interrupted while we discuss this—problem."

"How about going to the beach for a swim? There may be a lot of people, but most of them come from out-of-state."

"Marvelous," Billie said. "I'll bring some sandwiches."

After he hung up, Karl leaned against the wall and smiled. His mother came up behind him. "Why not go back to bed, dear?"

"I'm wide-awake, Mom." He lifted her off her feet and hugged her. "I'm starved, too."

His mother studied him as he put her down. "I've often wondered how it would hit you," she said.

Karl shaved, showered, and dressed, then joined his mother in the kitchen. "Billie and I are going to the beach at one," he said.

Mrs. Roebish placed his breakfast in front of him. Then, pouring herself a cup of coffee, she sat down opposite him. "You and Billie Martin seem to be hitting it off together," she said.

He was surprised at how eager he was to talk about her. "She's stupendous, Mom. She isn't nineteen yet, but you'd think she was at least twenty-one." Karl put his fork down and became grave. "I hope you won't be shocked to hear that I'm in love, Mom."

"I've had a few hints this morning." Her smile faded. "Isn't this a bit fast, Karl? You've just met her."

"It sounds crazy, but there it is. And I can tell she feels the same way. Not that either of us has said anything. Yet."

"How is Lieutenant Martin going to feel?"

Karl frowned. "I don't know."

"It's always ticklish when a young man falls in love with his boss's daughter," Mrs. Roebish said. "All I can say is, make very sure of your own feelings before you say one word to Billie."

A LULL BEFORE a holiday weekend was virtually unknown in police work, and as Red Martin had anticipated, the pressures were mounting steadily by Thursday afternoon. Cars clogged the highways as vacationers headed toward the Connecticut shore or drove through the state en route to Cape Cod, upper New England, and Canada. Young people were pouring into Pine Lodge Lake in large numbers. The chatter on the squawk box in the lieutenant's office was almost continuous, but he listened with only half an ear as he struggled to clean up his paper work.

"Sir," a trooper said, coming into his office, "there's a man to see you, a Puerto Rican. He says his name is Jackson, and that you know him. I never heard of a Puerto Rican named Jackson."

"Send him in." Red grinned, but offered no explanation.

A slender man in baggy trousers and a faded work shirt entered. Closing the door behind him, he moved to a chair opposite the desk. Tito Jackson was an informer, and not by choice. Red had treated him leniently when he had landed in trouble several years earlier, and on another occasion had let Jackson's son off with a warning when the boy had been in a jam. Both acts had paid handsome dividends. Tito had connections with the mob; his tips were reliable.

"How have you been, Tito?" Red asked. "Your boy keeping out of mischief?"

"He better, or I break his neck. I got him working with me in the lumberyard."

"Good. You can keep an eye on him there," Red said.

"That's what I figure. My Juan is a good boy, Lieutenant, but those punks who call themselves his friends, they pester him."

Red nodded, produced two cigars from a desk drawer, and gave one to his visitor. Jackson took his time lighting it. Suddenly he spoke in a low voice. "The mob is getting into drugs. Some of the latinos and blacks. The new muscle boys."

"Your son's crowd." Red inspected the ash on his cigar.

"Not Juan! They try to persuade him to peddle for them this weekend, but he's got too much sense. Very easy, they said. He could pick up a profit of five, ten thousand. You know where?"

"I could guess," Red said.

"The festival at Pine Lodge Lake. The one who tries most hard to persuade Juan is going himself. He will get rid of the small-time pushers, and he will make himself a small fortune. He already boasts that someday he will be the head of his own family in the mob. The first latino in New England to rise so high."

"Nothing like ambition," Red said.

"Felipe Magador, he aims too high."

"I don't recall him. Where at the festival will he operate?"

"I do not know. But his girl friend, she is mad with him, so maybe she could tell. It would make me feel good if I know that Felipe stops pestering my Juan."

"I know how you feel." Red waved a casual farewell.

When Jackson had left, he called Captain MacGregor of CID in Hartford and repeated what Tito had told him. "He says this pusher's name is Felipe Magador."

MacGregor gave a low whistle. "We've been building quite a record on Magador, but we've never been able to nail him. There's no doubt he's moving up in the mob hierarchy. I'm surprised he'd take on an operation like this himself."

"From what my informant says, he smells a big profit at the festival. There's one more angle." Red passed along the information about Magador's girl.

"Good. Can you have somebody get together with her, Red? Sergeant Donovan knows our routines. I'd appreciate it if you'd send him out on the assignment. In civvies, naturally."

"Naturally," Red echoed, and put down the receiver. He should have known better than to do Hartford a favor. Shorthanded as he was, he now had to send one of his sergeants chasing after a mobster's lady friend.

THE communications system between Hartford and the festival grounds was relatively simple. A CID sergeant, wearing civilian clothes and sitting in an unmarked convertible parked outside the grounds, received a coded radio message from Hartford a little after 3:00 p.m. At a prearranged time, some twenty minutes later a courier left the grounds and strolled past the convertible. "Tell Kirkland to call the captain," the sergeant said.

The courier nodded, ran a hand through his long, greasy hair, and went on his way. By 3:30 he had returned to the festival grounds, located Trooper Kirkland, and passed along the message. Annie waited another quarter of an hour before she, too, left the grounds and went to a small general store. Entering through the rear, she picked up a telephone in the tiny back room that had been set up as a direct line to headquarters.

By 4:10 she was back at the festival, where she found Gladys Whitman listening to a guitarist. Together they strolled off into the woods. "Captain MacGregor wants all agents to keep watch for a Cosa Nostra member named Felipe Magador. He's a pusher, a lady-killer, and a very tough hombre. He's to be kept under surveillance, but we can't arrest him without the captain's okay."

She described Magador in detail, and they parted. Some minutes later, while apparently meandering aimlessly through the festival grounds, Annie recognized another CID agent and passed along the instructions. As she made her way back toward the area where she and Gladys had left their bedrolls, luck intervened.

Three young men were standing near the shore of Pine Lodge Lake, and one in particular attracted her attention. He was slender, with razor-cut black hair, and a small ugly scar above his left eyebrow identified him as Magador. She sat down, lit a marijuana cigarette, and pretended to smoke it. If her luck held, the distinctive odor would drift in their direction.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw one of the young men hand Magador some folded bills and receive a small packet in return. Then he and the other man left, and she knew Magador was studying her. "Hi," he said, with only a trace of a Latin-American accent. "You've got a taste for good grass."

Annie turned as if aware of him for the first time. His expression was that of the calculating connoisseur of women, and uneasily she recalled Hartford's warning—female agents were to exercise particular caution in dealing with him.

Magador sat down beside her, then reached out and took the cigarette from her fingers. "I knew it was good," he said, holding the burning joint beneath his nostrils. He handed it back with a flourish. "If you need more, maybe it can be arranged."

She engraved every word on her mind, against the day when she would be called to testify against him in court. "I think I brought enough with me," she replied.

"If you want anything stronger . . ." His voice trailed away.

"No, thanks. I stick to pot."

For a time he sat in silence, his eyes boring into her. "The festival opens with the Basin Street Five. You going to hear them?"

"I wouldn't miss them for anything!" Annie and her husband had been Basin Street Five fans.

"Then I'll see you there." He rose. "I'm Felipe."

"Annie," she said.

Once more he studied her, making no attempt to conceal his interest. "Annie," he said, "I go for girls like you. Here's a little present, so you don't forget me between now and tonight." He dropped a bag of marijuana in her lap, then sauntered off.

Watching him, Annie was both pleased and apprehensive about her conquest. She would be able to keep him under surveillance, but she realized he would expect full value. And she felt certain that the slight bulge under his windbreaker on the left side was a gun.

THEY went for a swim, then unpacked the box lunch and sat on a beach blanket as they ate. Nearby a group of teen-age girls listened to rock music on their radio, but neither Karl nor Billie was aware of them.

"Now that we're here, I wish I hadn't called you," Billie said.

"Wow. What a compliment."

She reddened beneath her tan. "I didn't mean it that way. I just don't want to bother you with my problem."

"It won't be a bother. I'm flattered that you brought it to me."

Billie nibbled on her sandwich. "What do you know about the rock festival?" she asked suddenly.

"Not too much. There must have been fifteen thousand there by early this morning, and tomorrow it'll be fifty to sixty."

"What will it be like for the kids who go to the festival?"

Karl frowned. "Living conditions will be grubby. And if it's anything like other festivals, about ninety percent of the kids will at

least try smoking the weed." He swallowed a bite of food, staring at her. "You aren't planning to go—"

"I have no intention of going." Billie poured lemonade into plastic cups. "But it doesn't sound too awful."

"It'll be pretty bad." He hitched closer, lowering his voice. "Nobody is too worried about pot. It's the hard stuff."

She was obviously upset. Karl reached across the blanket and covered her hand with his. "What's the matter, Billie?"

"It's my sister. A lot of her friends are going to the festival—"

"And she's going with them?"

Billie nodded. "She'll have to sneak out, of course. She'll leave a note saying she's going to a friend's house for a couple of days. But my parents will find out and there'll be a terrible row."

"No wonder." Karl's expression was grim. "There are other angles. Like sex all over the place. When is your sister going?"

"She's intending to drive there with some friends this afternoon."

"Then we've got to stop her," Karl said.

"Yes, I know. I didn't want to rat on her to our parents—"

"They don't have to know about it. If you like, I'll give her the pitch on what it's like up there."

Billie looked relieved. "Would you?"

"Sure. Let's go." They gathered up their belongings and walked quickly to Karl's car.

Ordinarily the beach was a quarter of an hour's drive from the Martin house, but he made it in ten minutes, pulling into the driveway at a fast clip. The garage was empty. "Mother has gone out," Billie said, and hurried into the house, calling to her sister.

Karl followed at a slower pace, feeling like an intruder, wishing that this girl were not the daughter of his commanding officer. Billie, out of breath, was coming down the stairs as he entered the living room. "Myra's gone." She handed him a folded note. "This was propped on Mother's dressing table."

He read the note. "She went to Pine Lodge Lake, all right."

"Mother may have gone to any one of a dozen places, so I'll have to tell Daddy. Will you come with me?"

Karl did not hesitate. "Sure," he said.

In a few minutes they reached the barracks. Lieutenant Martin

was talking on the telephone, and waved them into his office. Billie sat down, but Karl remained standing.

"Prepare yourself for some bad news, Daddy," Billie said as her father hung up. Quickly she told her story.

Red's face was pale as he took Myra's letter and scanned it. "Was she at home when you left for the beach?"

"Yes," Billie said, "but Mother was just about to go out, and I guess Myra didn't stay long after she had gone."

"That probably makes it too late to pick up the crazy kid at a roadblock, but we'll try." Red grabbed his telephone and gave some instructions to the dispatcher. Then he began to pace the office. "Cars heading for Pine Lodge Lake are lined up bumper to bumper on the turnpike," he said. "Unless someone on patrol happens to recognize her in a car, it will be almost impossible to stop her. And I can't send anyone to drag her out of the festival grounds. No troopers are allowed on private property."

"One thought has occurred to me, Lieutenant," Karl said. "Some of the boys have been talking about a slew of Captain MacGregor's people being in there, and—"

"Of course! Some of them may know what she looks like." Red rewarded the rookie with a smile, then reached for his telephone and called CID headquarters in Hartford. When MacGregor came on the line, Red explained his problem. "I'd appreciate it, Max, if you'd tell me who you have working the festival."

When her father put down the phone Billie asked, "Any luck?"

"Maybe. There are two women troopers there who know Myra. Gladys Whitman and Annie Kirkland. Roebish, are you free to do me an off-duty favor?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Drive Billie to the west entrance at Pine Lodge Lake. Sergeant Danforth is on duty there this afternoon. You know him, Billie. Ask him to pass in word to either Whitman or Kirkland, and if one of them is free she'll come out to see you. Be careful not to talk to her if anyone else is around. Under no circumstances are you to compromise her undercover status. Is that clear?"

"Very clear, Daddy."

"Tell her—" Red's composure broke, and he had to start again.

"Ask her to keep an eye on Myra, if she can ever find her in that crowd, and talk a little sense into her. So I won't have to break the fool kid's neck when I get my hands on her."

LINDSAY Northrup sat in the back room of the bar and sipped his beer. He had guessed that the place was an El Fatah hangout; now he recognized many of the men he had seen at the meeting in the old church. There had been a stir when he entered. Word of his promotion in the El Fatah ranks must have spread.

Lindsay looked up as Andy Lennox came in and joined the crowd at the bar. Andy raised his hand in greeting, but Lindsay noted that the big man's attitude was more reserved than it had been earlier. He must suspect that Lindsay was waiting for Diane.

The time had come, Lindsay told himself, to be rid of Diane. If she came between him and Lennox now, she could do him more harm than good. And the best way to keep in with Lennox was to transfer his attention to somebody else. He turned to two flashily dressed hookers sitting at a table opposite him. The taller of the two girls had already been trying to flirt with him. He had to admit she was a beauty. She had a mane of blond-dyed hair, her skin was pale, and her fine features were Caucasian. He guessed that she was a quadroon, perhaps an octoroon.

Lindsay smiled at her and the girl came to his table. "Hi," she said. "Are you looking for company, Rosey Northrup?"

"How about that? You know my name."

"Everybody around here knows you. Want me to sit down?"

"I wish you would." Something unexpectedly dignified about her caused him to stand and hold her chair. "What'll you drink?"

"Just a beer, thanks."

Lindsay called an order to the waiter, then turned to the girl. "You know me, but I don't know you."

"Yes you do. I'm Sunny Watson. When you were in college, you used to date my sister. Rosemary."

He was stunned and wary. One of the hazards of an undercover assignment in his old neighborhood was being recognized by people who knew him and might have learned he had become a trooper. "How is Rosemary?" he said.

"Married. To a doctor in New York. With a couple of kids."

It astonished him that the sister of a respectable, middle-class girl should have become a prostitute. "You were about ten years old when I knew you."

"I remember," Sunny Watson said. "Back in those days you called yourself Lindsay Northrup."

"I guess I did." He felt uneasy.

"I've been told you still do. In some places." Sunny sipped her beer. "I can't drink too much of this stuff. It ruins my figure."

He played along. "Your figure's even better than your sister's."

"It has to be. Because of my work. I'm not the only one around here who isn't what most people think."

Lindsay was now sure she knew he was a cop.

"I'm a model," she said. "I live in New York, too. In the East Eighties, not far from Rosemary and her husband."

He hesitated for a moment. "What are you doing here?" He lowered his voice. "I mean—in a dump like this."

Her manner became casual. "If you have nothing better to do, maybe you and I could take a little walk."

The future of his assignment was at stake. He pushed back his chair, and left some coins on the table.

The girl waited until they reached John Winthrop Boulevard before she said, "We've got to talk, Lindsay. I'd take you to my mother's house, but that would require too many explanations."

"We can go to my room."

Sunny hesitated. "Well, there's something you'll have to understand first. I'm not what you probably think I am."

"I had already gathered you weren't a hooker, Sunny," he said.

He led her to the rooming house, and closed and locked his door behind them. "It's not the Waldorf, but it's safe to talk here." She sat on his bed and he pulled up the rickety chair to face her.

"My roommate comes from Winthrop, too," Sunny said, "and when she decided to spend a few days at home this week, I came up with her. Ellen is a top model, but she has odd tastes in men. Her current boy friend is active in El Fatah. I've never met him—he's careful not to meet Ellen at our apartment. But yesterday she was full of a story he had just told her about a confrontation at

an El Fatah meeting. From her description of one of the men, I guessed it might be you."

"Why was that?" Lindsay asked.

"Because I know you belong to the state police. Rosemary mentions you often. I had to see you, so I found out from Ellen where the El Fatah crowd hangs out. I got dressed up like this and came down to the slums in order to warn you."

A blood vessel in his temple was throbbing. "Of what?"

"El Fatah isn't really sure about you. Ellen's boy friend and his chums voted to give you some big job—because they consider you expendable. By putting you in the forefront of the action, they expect you to be killed without their having to do it."

"I have no intention of being killed by anyone, so thanks for the warning. But why have you gone to all this trouble for me? I haven't seen you or your family since you were a child."

She averted her eyes. "If you knew anything about little girls, you'd realize there's nobody in the world more glamorous than your big sister's boy friend. I had a secret crush on you for longer than I care to think about."

Before he could reply there was a pounding at the door. "I'll handle this," Lindsay told her as he went to unlock it.

Diane burst into the room, eyes blazing. "They told me at the bar that you came here with this little tramp. Sister," she said viciously, "you keep away from Rosey, hear?"

The enraged prostitute threw herself at the girl on the bed, but Lindsay intervened and dragged her away. "Cool it, will you!" he commanded. He slapped her across the face.

Diane cried out in pain and fury. Turning the situation to his advantage, Lindsay said, "That's just a taste of what you'll get if you come around here again. Keep your paws off my girl."

"Since when is she your girl?"

"What's that to you?" Lindsay moved over to the bed and ran a hand down Sunny's body.

Realizing she had lost, Diane became surly. "You got no call to hit me," she said, rubbing her face.

"Would you like it better if I told Andy Lennox how you've been chasing after me?"

"You mind your own business, Rosey Northrup." She sniffed, went to the door, opened it, and slammed it behind her.

Sunny came to life. "Your friends," she said, "play a little too rough for me."

"I'm sorry I had to get fresh," Lindsay said, "but I had to make her think you and I have a thing going."

"I'm glad I've been able to help you sort out the women in your life." Her tone was cool.

"That was just the beginning. I'm hoping that you'll spend some time with me during the next couple of days, so I can convince an El Fatah top dog that his woman means nothing to me."

Red Martin found his wife waiting in the living room when he returned from Troop R barracks. He tried to maintain a façade of calm. "Hi," he said. "Are we having a drink tonight?"

"How can you even think of having a drink when Myra is at that horrible festival?"

She was even more perturbed than he had expected. "As I told you on the phone, we're doing everything we can to find Myra," he said soothingly, "and I'll be notified the minute she's been located." Taking a bottle of bourbon from the cabinet, he started toward the kitchen.

Emily followed. She watched him remove a tray of ice from the refrigerator. "If I were an officer in the state police," she said, "I'd put on full uniform and go into the place myself for her!"

He shook his head. "It isn't that simple, Em. No departmental personnel are allowed to enter the festival grounds in uniform."

"Why can't you look for Myra in civilian clothes, then?"

He dropped ice cubes into a glass. "Even a blind man could see I'm not a kid, Em. What's more, I look like a cop. I might very well provide the spark that would set off serious riots, and then Myra really might get hurt."

Emily regarded him with disdain as he sipped his bourbon and water. "May I ask what you *are* doing?"

"We have competent people at the festival, who know Myra. Billie and Karl Roebish established contact with one of them thirty minutes ago. When Myra is found, an attempt will be made

to persuade her to come home. If that fails, the undercover agents will keep an eye on her as best they can. The situation up there is volatile, and our personnel have big fish to fry."

"You're saying that there are more important things to you than the welfare of your daughter!"

Red could feel his temper rising. "To me—as a person—Myra's welfare is vitally important. But as a state police officer I have to put other things first."

"Your career ruined my life long ago," Emily said, "and now Myra's is ruined too."

His patience was exhausted. "That's the most cockeyed statement I've ever heard. She's a healthy kid, and I have every confidence she's going to be okay."

"I can't share your blind optimism. And while we're at it, I suppose you're closing your eyes to Billie and that trooper."

"She could meet a lot of boys who don't come close to Karl Roebish's league. He had a good war record, and was second in his class at the academy. He'll be a good trooper."

"While his wife struggles along on a second-rate income and spends two-thirds of her evenings alone. Not to mention the constant fear that her husband will be killed on duty. I won't have Billie throw away her future by marrying a trooper."

All at once he felt very weary. "Let's stop challenging each other, Em. I'm pleased that Billie is dating a first-rate boy, and I refuse to believe the end of the world has come for Myra. As for you and me, I'm tired of being put in the wrong. After I walk out of here tomorrow morning, I may not see you until Monday night. So you'll have time to do some hard thinking. If you decide that life with a trooper is too much for you, I'll give you a divorce."

SERGEANT Michael Donovan checked his watch, then flipped on his intercom. "Five R to R," he said. "I'm taking off now."

"R to Five R. Roger. Let us know how you make out, Sergeant."

Mike headed to the turnpike, and drove a short distance to the first Chestnut exit. On a hill just beyond the ramp was the Old Coach House, a nineteenth-century mansion that had been converted into a restaurant. Three couples were seated at the bar,

and a few tables were occupied, but the place was, as usual, quiet.

Mike went to a corner table, following the instructions he had received, and ordered a mug of draft beer.

The instant Rita Valdez came into the bar he knew she could be no one else. Cosa Nostra members had a penchant for spectacular women. Her wavy, red hair tumbled almost to her waist; she was wearing a tight, knitted stretch top, a skirt that barely reached her thighs, and over-the-knee plastic boots.

Mike waved to her, then rose as she came to the table. "I'm Donovan, Miss Valdez," he said.

She fluttered her false lashes. "How did you recognize me?"

"That's my job," Mike said. She asked for a vodka on the rocks, and he allowed her a sip or two before continuing. "I understand we have an acquaintance in common."

"Yeah, only I know him better than you do, which is too bad for me. Maybe it'll be too bad for him, too, because I know plenty you want to hear." She laughed. "But there's one thing that bugs me. Will I have to testify in court against him?"

"Certainly not. We never reveal our private sources of information to anyone."

"That's good. Felipe plays rough, and I don't want my face carved up with a razor. All I'm going to do is pass along some facts and then go back home and make like nothing has happened. I didn't talk to anybody. Can it be worked out that way?"

"Of course," Mike said.

"What turned me off," Rita began, "was his going off to work this weekend after he promised to take me to Nassau. It's the third time he's let me down. We were supposed to go on a cruise over the Fourth of July, only he had a sudden job to do."

Mike said, "It was over the Fourth that Sal Rumbino disappeared. They found his body off the Rhode Island coast."

"Well," Rita said, "from a few hints he dropped, Felipe was in charge of that funeral party. A few days later he had green to burn, only he spent most of it on another broad."

Mike looked sympathetic, but said nothing.

"It burns a girl up when she's not supposed to go with anybody else, but the fellow who lives with her goes all around New En-

gland trying to make out with anything in skirts. What a sex maniac!" She became ruminative. "Only he isn't very good at it. Isn't that a gas?"

"It's very funny," Mike assured her. "You were going to tell me about the weekend."

"I was coming to that." Rita took a swallow of her drink. "No Nassau. Because Felipe had to go off to hear some rock music. He expects to make a real killing this weekend. Selling his handy little packages. He promised me the ring I've been wanting. And it was only when I found out that there's a blonde up in Boston who's going off with him next week that I decided to blow the whistle on him. He'll take her to Nassau instead of me, and she'll probably get my ring, too!"

Mike felt it was time to haul her back into the mainstream again. "What are the handy little packages?"

"Well, he'll peddle cut grass. But it's the heroin that really rakes in the green, and he's got a bundle of pure stuff."

"You're sure of your facts, Rita?" Mike asked.

"I saw some of the packages myself." She smiled at him. "I hope I'm not distracting you. A lot of fellows have told me it isn't easy for them to think when I'm around."

"They're right," Mike lied.

A manicured hand rested on his arm. "You're cute," she said.

The time had come, he told himself, to wind up the interview. "Is there any other information you want to give us?"

"Maybe you could get in touch with me over the weekend, and I'll try to think up some more." Reaching into her shoulder bag, she took out a pad of notepaper and scribbled down a telephone number. "Anytime you're free, give me a ring."

As she made her flamboyant exit Mike carefully stored the scrap of paper in a notebook from his pocket. He recorded the information she had given him, dating and initialing each page so that the data would be admissible as evidence in court.

NEWCOMERS were pouring into the festival grounds at a rate of more than three thousand an hour, according to the estimate of the officer in charge of the night detail on the perimeter. No un-

toward incidents developed, however, and most of the young people who arrived were orderly and good-humored.

The grounds covered more than three hundred acres, but thick woods and Pine Lodge Lake itself occupied most of the area, so space was at a premium. Twenty to thirty thousand young people were crowded onto the open hillside that sloped down toward a large bandstand. Waves of applause and cheers greeted the Basin Street Five after each number.

Annie Kirkland, who sat on the slope hugging her bare knees, recalled a happier time when her husband, Jonathan, had been alive, and no evening had been complete without playing at least one Basin Street Five disc. For a few moments the music helped her forget her unsavory assignment.

At last the Five took a break and Annie stood, stretching. Then, off to her left, she caught a glimpse of a slender man in a black satin shirt, and her nostalgic mood vanished. She quickly realized, however, that Felipe Magador was not looking for her. He was engrossed in conversation with a group of girls, and had probably forgotten the half date he had made with her.

One girl in the group looked familiar. Annie stared harder, and confirmed her impression: she had found Myra Martin. Small wonder she had not recognized her immediately. Myra's figure looked disconcertingly mature in a halter top and hot pants, and she was wearing considerable quantities of eye makeup.

Magador seemed to be relishing the girl's youthful beauty, and his smile spurred Annie to immediate action. Threading through the crowd, she placed a casual hand on Magador's shoulder. "Hi," she said. Then, taking a calculated risk, she added, "Hello, Myra."

Felipe Magador recovered instantly. "I've been looking all over for you, baby," he said.

Myra responded slowly, puzzled by Annie's changed appearance. Then she recognized her, and the training of a state trooper's daughter came to her aid. "Hello, Annie," was all she said.

Felipe slid an arm around Annie's waist. "I'll be right with you, baby. I was just arranging a get-together with these kids. Let's meet at the bandstand tomorrow, girls, around nine." There were murmurs of assent, but Myra only looked at the ground.

"I want a word with you, too, Myra," Annie said. "Where's your campsite?"

"We haven't found one yet."

"Then I'll take you and your friends to a spot I've found. You won't have much privacy, but there are lots of trees and the ground is soft. Meet me at the dock right after the concert." Myra heard the austere note in Annie's voice, and lacked the courage to defy it. She nodded without looking at her.

Annie turned away abruptly, and Magador hurried to catch up with her. "Are you mad at me?" he demanded.

She gave him a warm smile. "Certainly not!"

"Good. I was afraid you were steamed because I was with those kids. I always like to know what kids are thinking. That's why I thought I'd rustle up some breakfast for them tomorrow."

Yes, Annie thought, and push all the drugs you can persuade them to buy. But she was saved the need to reply, because the Basin Street Five were tuning up and there was a scramble for last-minute places. Felipe pulled her to the ground. Feeling safe in the crowd, Annie allowed herself to lean against his shoulder.

"You know that kid with the reddish hair, don't you?"

"You might say," she replied carefully, "that we're in the same family." She knew that to Cosa Nostra members there was nothing more sacred than the family.

When the concert drew to an end, Felipe said, "I've set up my pad in the woods. Come on."

Annie rose. "Wait. I've got to see Myra first. On a family matter."

"Okay," he said. "I'll be down near the bandstand. But make it snappy, baby." He started down the hillside.

Relieved to be rid of him, and telling herself that the surveillance could be resumed in the morning, Annie walked to the dock. Several couples stood at the far end, which jutted into the water. But Myra was nowhere to be seen, and Annie felt a stab of alarm. Then a dark shape materialized from behind some trees. "I'm here," Myra said. Annie groped her way into the woods.

"I won't let you send me home," Myra said defiantly.

Annie was reminded of the scores of troubled youngsters she had dealt with as a trooper. "I have no intention of sending you

anywhere," she responded. "I just want to have a word with you."

"My father sent you here to get me," Myra said.

"This may shock you," Annie replied, "but you aren't that important to your father's superiors." She was pleased to see that Myra looked stunned. "My job here has nothing to do with you, though I did get an informal message about you this afternoon. Your father would appreciate it if you'd go home."

"My friends and I are planning to split on Monday. Why should I be frozen out—just because my father is who he is?"

"I think you're behaving badly, but it isn't my place to get mixed up in something that just concerns your family."

"Well, thanks." Myra peered at her. "Maybe you're not so bad."

Annie had her on the defensive, and intended to keep her there. "Have you ever smoked pot?"

"No."

"Ever try speed? Cocaine? Ever try mainlining?"

"Certainly not!" Myra was becoming indignant.

"You're going to find just about every known drug for sale around here," Annie said, "and the salesmen are some of the trickiest people in the racket. So watch your step."

"I'm just here for fun."

"That's what they all say, at the start."

"Look," Myra said. "Why don't you go back to your boy friend and stop worrying about me?"

Annie was startled. "My boy friend?"

"I saw you cuddling with him during the concert."

"He happens to be one of the most disreputable, vicious, and dishonest men in the United States," Annie said.

"You've got to be kidding!"

"I mean it, Myra." Annie stepped closer and gripped the girl's wrist. "Listen to me," she said in a low, intense voice. "You—and all of your friends—will stay away from Felipe Magador, the man I found you talking to."

"I didn't know anybody could be so jealous!"

Explanations were useless, Annie realized. "You'll do as I tell you," she said, "or I'll get you shipped out of here. Now, you're coming with me to the campsite where you're going to sleep."

IV

FRIDAY

WHEN Red came downstairs he found Billie waiting for him in the kitchen. "Hey, you're up early," he said.

"I couldn't sleep."

"I can't say I had the best night of my life."

"Worrying about Myra, Daddy?"

"Among other things. But I had a call earlier. Annie Kirkland has made contact with Myra, and she'll try to keep an eye on her."

"Hooray for that much. She refuses to come home, I suppose."

"Apparently." Red accepted the mug of coffee that Billie handed him. "It isn't Myra who got you up this early in the day."

"Not entirely." Billie sipped her coffee, then faced him. "What's your opinion of Karl?"

He had been anticipating the question. "As nearly as I can judge he's going to be a first-rate trooper, although I won't know for certain until I see how he behaves under pressure. Anyway, I like him. So do you, I gather."

Color rose swiftly to the girl's face. "Very much." She hesitated. "What does Mother think of him?"

"To your mother, he's a trooper, no more and no less, and she doesn't want a daughter of hers to get involved with one."

The girl drew a deep breath. "I'm already involved."

"I'm not surprised," Red said. "How involved?"

Again she flushed. "I haven't slept with him, and I won't. What's more, he hasn't asked me to."

"That's good." He allowed her to see his relief. "Not that I really doubted you, honey. But your generation doesn't think the way mine does, and I couldn't help doing some worrying."

"You needn't. I'm old-fashioned, I guess, and so is Karl. I understand your position, Daddy."

"That's what I assumed—or at least hoped." He finished his coffee. "I'm off to work. Take care of yourself, honey—and of your mother. I'll be in touch whenever I get any news of Myra."

En route to the barracks he tried to forget his family problems, but it was almost impossible. By Monday night his marriage might

be in shambles, and the life of his younger daughter could be ruined in spite of his efforts to protect her.

As soon as he arrived at the barracks Paul Palmer, the senior sergeant, summoned all troopers to the dayroom. The entire troop stood at attention and saluted as Red entered. He returned the salute, then Palmer put the men at ease.

"All of you know that we're going into high gear this morning," Red said. "We have problems in a number of places. In Winthrop. In Chestnut. At Pine Lodge Lake. And on the highways. None of us will get much rest in the next four days. You'll have to grab a little sleep in the dormitories whenever you can. No one will go home for any purpose without express permission from me.

"The troop is being divided into three units, with a sergeant in charge of each. One detail will be assigned to Pine Lodge Lake. Another will stand by for riot duty in Winthrop. The third will supervise the traffic patrol auxiliaries and be prepared to intervene in Chestnut if trouble develops there. Sergeant Cohen will post the assignments. Any questions or comments?"

The men were silent. "Dismissed," Red said.

The long, grueling weekend was under way.

HUNDREDS of bathers, most of them nude, were swimming in Pine Lodge Lake. Annie Kirkland was only a few years older than the majority of the revelers, but she had nothing in common with them. She sat on the shore, and felt completely isolated. Gladys Whitman approached carrying two cups of coffee, and Annie gratefully accepted one. "Look at them cavorting there," she said.

Gladys dropped onto the grass beside her. "I'd rather not. I wonder if we ought to say something to the festival heads. The lake is getting polluted; it ought to be closed."

"I saw one of the managers taking water samples," Annie said. "So I imagine they'll do something on their own. How is God's gift to women and drugs making out this morning?"

Gladys had been keeping watch on Magador. "I saw him sell at least a thousand dollars' worth of junk after breakfast," she said. "Then I turned over the surveillance to one of the men."

"Felipe is quite an operator, all right."

"He's worse than you know. I heard from headquarters that he was probably mixed up in the Sal Rumbino murder."

Annie whistled under her breath. "Thank God I was able to scare the Martin kid away from him. She didn't keep that nine o'clock appointment with him this morning."

"I hate to tell you this," Gladys said, "but she's seen him since then." As Annie stared at her, she went on. "Undoubtedly Myra knew you were keeping watch on her at nine, so she waited another hour before she and a couple of her chums went down to find him. By then our Felipe had set up shop behind the old boathouse. One of the girls bought a bag of grass from him."

"Those idiots! I suppose this means Myra is going to try pot."

"Probably. But you've done all you could; you've even gotten her to set up camp near us. Lieutenant Martin can't ask more than that of you. You can't be blamed if she smokes pot—or even if she lets Felipe teach her the fundamentals of sex."

Annie felt sick. "We've got to find some way to stop a sixteen-year-old from making a mess of her life."

IT WAS almost noon when Karl Roebish opened his eyes in a room on the second floor of the barracks. He shaved, showered, and dressed, and went down to the mess hall for breakfast.

Most of the tables were occupied by the auxiliaries who were on highway patrol over the weekend. Karl took his tray to a table where Sergeant Donovan was sitting.

"You should have slept longer, Roebish," Donovan said. "Now that you're up, I'll have to give you an assignment."

"Which is it to be, Sergeant—Winthrop or Pine Lodge Lake?"

"Neither. You're going to be a highway patrol supervisor."

Karl was dismayed. "With all the action we've got ahead, don't stick me with that!"

"Sorry," Donovan said. "Rookies are almost never assigned to riot-prevention duty. So I'm afraid you'll spend the weekend doing what you normally do—except that there will be more of it." He rose to leave. "Don't rush your meal. Take another fifteen or twenty minutes before you report."

With an extra few minutes to himself, Karl went to a public

telephone and dialed the number he no longer had to look up.

"Hello," Billie Martin said when she came on the line. "Have you heard the good news about Myra? Annie found her, and is looking after her."

"That's great."

"Where are you now?" Billie asked.

"At the barracks. This isn't important, but I've got a minute or two before I go back to work, and I just want to tell you I wish I could see you today."

There was a pause. "It's very important," Billie said. "To me. Just don't try to do too much in the next couple of days."

Karl was ashamed to tell her of his ignominious assignment. "I won't," he said. "May I call you again, when I get a chance?"

"Anytime," Billie said.

When he reported to Sergeant Donovan's office, he was told to patrol the southwestern sector. "The auxiliaries will call on you if they need to issue tickets," Donovan said. "Keep your eyes open, and don't let anybody get away with anything. If we lose control in just one area, we'll soon have chaos everywhere."

LINDSAY Northrup took his time walking back to his rooming house after placing a couple of two-dollar bets on the afternoon's races. There was no doubt he was being kept under tight surveillance. The man who had drifted in his wake when he had gone to the betting parlor was still tailing him.

Turning the corner onto his street, he saw a girl with long, pale hair standing in front of his building, and immediately increased his pace. It was his job to take risks, but he didn't want Sunny becoming involved. When she saw him, her smile was warm.

"We're being watched," Lindsay told her in a low tone. Putting his arm around her waist, he led her into the house and up to his room. "I could have met you somewhere," he said when he had closed the door. "This part of town isn't safe for you."

Sunny laughed. "I can take care of myself." Then she sobered. "I've something important to tell you, Lindsay. You don't have a telephone, so I had to come."

A tap sounded at the door and Joe Borden came in. "It was

damned careless of you to leave this unlocked," he said, stopping short when he saw the girl. "Oops, I'll see you later."

"No, sit down," Lindsay said. "Sunny, this is Joe. Joe, she came to tell me something important."

Sunny hesitated. "It's okay," Lindsay said. "He is my friend."

"Ellen came to my mother's house today," Sunny said. She saw from Joe's expression that Lindsay had told him who Ellen was. "Lindsay, that girl who came here yesterday must have convinced her boy friend that you really are a spy, because he has been ordered to—to get rid of you. They plan to blame it on the police in a big fight that's coming."

Joe stared hard at his partner. "It strikes me the time has come for you to vanish, Lindsay, " he said.

Lindsay shook his head. "If I try to bolt, the man following me undoubtedly has orders to knife me or shoot me down."

"Probably." Joe was irritated. "But you could give him the slip. You know the rule. When an agent's cover is blown, he moves on."

"I'm not so sure mine has been blown," Lindsay said. "They may have told Andy Lennox to shove steel into my gut, but that's not to happen until tomorrow, and if they really thought I was a police agent they'd have taken steps before now. I'm convinced I'm safe for another twenty-four hours."

"It seems to me that it's for Captain MacGregor to decide."

"I forbid you to go to him," Lindsay said. "I'm still the only one in a position to get the information we'll need tomorrow, and I refuse to cop out because of a scare!"

Joe looked at him for a moment, then bolted from the room. Cursing under his breath, Lindsay went to the window. He saw Joe emerge from the building and hurry off down the street. "Sure as hell," he muttered, "he's going to call headquarters."

Sunny joined Lindsay at the window. "We have to put on a show for our friend across the street. The one who follows you. Remember?" She slid her arms around his neck, and he promptly forgot everything but the firm, pliant body that yielded to his embrace. Their kiss seemed to last for an eternity.

Sunny was the first to recover. "I imagine your friend, Joe, will be coming back soon," she said, her manner demure.

Lindsay sat down on the bed and grinned at her. "If you were on the El Fatah payroll," he said, "you couldn't do a better job of spinning me around like a kid's top."

A few minutes later Joe Borden came back. "Your immediate future is settled," he said triumphantly. "I just called MacGregor in Hartford. You and I are ordered to leave Winthrop today, and report to him first thing tomorrow morning for reassignment."

"I wouldn't mind a trip to Hartford," Lindsay said. "Unfortunately, you couldn't find me when you came back just now, and you'll have no chance to pass along MacGregor's message between now and tomorrow. So, since I've received no fresh orders, I'll continue in my present assignment."

"No, Lindsay!" Sunny cried.

"You can't do it!" Joe said.

"I'm doing it." Lindsay folded his arms. "It'll be your word against mine, Joe, and by the time this whole brouhaha is straightened out, I'll have all the information the department needs."

"My FIELD headquarters are set up outside the festival grounds," Red Martin told the Winthrop chief of police as Captain Arthur Daniels listened. "We can sleep fifty at a time in our tents, and our field kitchen will feed shifts of a hundred."

"What worries me," Chief Paul Burke said, "is that you're massing your entire force up there in the hills near Pine Lodge Lake. But the big show will be down here."

"We can reach the Winthrop Common in exactly twenty-three minutes from our bivouac, Paul," Red said. "Riot equipment has already been issued, and we'll start moving down as soon as we get word from you that the El Fatah crowd is getting together."

"That disposes of my minor concern," Chief Burke said. "But your tanks are the most potent weapons in our arsenal, and it'll take a lot longer than twenty-three minutes for them to come rumbling down from the lake."

The two state police officers laughed. "The tanks will take a lot less time than that," Red told Burke. "We've pulled off a beaut, and if you don't know about it, the chances are that El Fatah is in the dark, too. Remember that fire at five o'clock this morning?"

"False alarm, you mean," Burke said. "Our whole fire department was called out, waking up the city. But there was no fire."

"I'm responsible for that," Art Daniels told him. "While everyone's attention was centered on the west end of town—and fire engines were blocking a certain route—our Marine Division was unloading the tanks at the docks at the east end of town from an LST loaned to us by the U.S. Navy. The tanks came ashore and moved into the garage under the state courthouse, which is where they are right now. Concealed under canvas."

"The crews are sleeping in the courthouse," Red said. "The tanks can reach the Common in precisely thirty seconds."

"You guys," Burke said, "are geniuses. This leaves only one question. Let's assume that your undercover people are right, and that El Fatah goes into action here in Winthrop. How many men can you supply to augment my active force of five hundred?"

"Red and I are prepared to take a calculated risk," Art said. "Things are so quiet at the festival that we're willing to cut down to a skeleton force there—and send every available man to you. With the troopers the commissioner will bring in from other districts, we'll be putting five hundred men into the streets of Winthrop."

Never, thought Paul Burke, had so many troopers been gathered in one place at one time. "Then God help El Fatah."

CAPTAIN Max MacGregor and his aides were eating sandwiches at their desks. A trooper brought in blankets for the cots that had been set up, and everyone settled down for a long night of work. The undercover agents at Pine Lodge Lake submitted regular reports, and there was added pressure on the men in the field to find out about plans for the Chestnut motorcycle-gang rumble.

The captain took telephone calls and read reports, occasionally calling in a secretary to dictate progress memos to Commissioner Chance. Now, as he ate his corned beef on rye and swept through the papers in his IN basket, a corporal came to the door.

"Excuse me, sir, but there's a woman here who insists on seeing you. She says it's about Lindsay Northrup. We haven't admitted we've ever heard of Northrup," the corporal said.

"According to the latest from his partner, he's pretending he

didn't get my order telling him to report here. Show the lady in."

He was unprepared for someone as young and attractive as the girl who came into his office. "MacGregor," he said, extending his hand. "Sit down and tell me what I can do for you."

"My name is Sunny Watson, and I'm a friend of Lindsay Northrup's. Years ago, when he was in college, he went with my sister, which is how I happened to know he's a trooper."

MacGregor remained silent. Sunny told him of her roommate's connection with El Fatah and of her own idea of getting in touch with Lindsay. Only when she said she had been present when he had refused to give up his assignment did the captain stir.

"You must realize, Miss Watson," he said, "that I have no proof of your identity. For all I know, you're working for El Fatah and hope to put the finger on somebody named Northrup by conning me into admitting he works for me."

The girl opened her handbag. "Here are the names and addresses of my relatives. You can check with my mother in Winthrop, and with my brother-in-law in New York."

"I'll do that." MacGregor sent a sergeant to verify the girl's account. In a few minutes the sergeant returned and handed the captain a slip of paper on which he had written: "She's clean. Brother-in-law is a well-known MD in NYC, and says she's okay. Ditto her mother, who is a high school principal in Winthrop."

Satisfied, MacGregor turned to the girl. "Suppose you tell me exactly why you're here."

"I want to help Lindsay, and I'm afraid he'll be knifed or shot by El Fatah."

"So am I, which is why I ordered him to report here. I'm wondering what's behind this outright refusal to obey orders."

"I believe it's enormously important to Lindsay to do his job. He'd consider he'd failed if he didn't finish what he'd started."

MacGregor nodded. "Nothing else makes sense. What it adds up to, of course, is that undercover work has driven Northrup a bit nuts. He needs a vacation—and then an assignment in uniform."

A wistful smile crossed Sunny's face. "That would be wonderful. And a relief to know he wouldn't be in such great danger."

"If it were feasible," MacGregor said, "I'd send some men into

the Winthrop ghetto and remove him by force. But if El Fatah finds out we're wise to them, they might scrap their plans for this weekend, only to pop up somewhere else later. All the same, we've got to protect Northrup, and I'll find some way to do it."

EXPERIMENTAL rock was the theme of the evening's concert, and the formless music, combined with the enormous crowd on the hillside, proved too much for Annie Kirkland. She made her way down to Pine Lodge Lake. It was relatively quiet in the woods that rimmed the shore, and Annie halted in a clearing.

"Going for a swim?" Myra Martin emerged from the shadows.

"Not in this lake," Annie replied. "It was closed today."

Myra giggled.

"It isn't funny. The pollution could make you seriously ill."

Again Myra giggled. Annie stepped closer and peered hard at the younger girl. "Wow! Am I stoned!" Myra said. "We've been on pot for the past couple of hours, and it does wonderful things."

"Like what?"

"Well, it makes me not give a damn that Mother and Daddy are going to nail my hide to the wall for coming to the festival."

Before Annie could reply she caught sight of a man coming toward them. It was Felipe Magador. "That's my date," Myra said.

Annie knew that under no circumstances could she permit the girl to go with him. "Good evening," she called.

"Hey, I'm in luck," Magador said. "The two best-looking chicks at the festival are waiting for me."

"Myra isn't waiting for anybody," Annie said grimly. "She's going to take a nap—to get over her jag from too much pot."

Myra's giggle sounded forced and a trifle weary.

"On your way," Annie said, and started her toward the camp area with a slap on the rear. The girl was too confused to argue, and started off through the woods.

"What's the idea?" Magador said, his eyes angry. "Are you her keeper? Every time I go near the kid you show up."

"Maybe I'm doing you a favor," Annie said. "Her father's a lieutenant in the state police. If he finds out you've supplied his daughter with pot, he won't rest until he's thrown the book at you."

Magador hesitated. "I sold it to her pal, not to her."

"He won't pay much attention to that fine distinction. Now, if you want to go ahead with your original plans for the evening, I'm sure you can catch her before she reaches her campsite."

For a long time he stood motionless. Then he smiled. "Thanks, but I'm not buying any of that merchandise."

Myra was safe now, and Annie felt weak with relief. But Magador's cold stare told her that she herself was in trouble.

"When you told me that you two belonged to the same family," he said, "you meant you belong to a trooper's family, too?"

Backed into a corner, she was forced to invent a story. "I didn't mean literally the same family. But Myra's a good friend of my younger sister's, and she comes over to our house all the time."

He was not yet satisfied. "You seem to know one hell of a lot about me," he said. "You knew that the pot the little redhead smoked came from me. And you knew I'd shy away when I heard that her old man is a trooper. How come? What else do you know?"

"What else should I know? You haven't made any secret of spreading grass. You gave me a bag right after we met. I assumed you wouldn't want a state trooper cracking down on you."

He appeared to be sifting her story, trying to find holes in it. "But we had a date last night, and you never showed."

She took a long chance. "When I came back to join you, you were making passes at somebody else. No girl wants to be part of a harem."

"So that's it." He smiled. "You were sore at me! But you still thought enough of me to tip me off about the redhead's old man." He reached for her, and was surprised she could elude his grasp so easily. The marijuana hadn't been enough, he decided, and increased the bait. "Remember what I said about Nassau?"

It was the first time he had mentioned Nassau. Annie could see he wasn't certain what he had said, probably because he made promises to so many women. "No. What did you say?"

"Okay, here's like it is. We get out of here on Monday night, right? I'll have plenty of green to spread around. So, on Tuesday, after I attend to a little business, you and I will hop on the noon plane to Nassau. How does that sound to you?"

It would interest Captain MacGregor to learn that Magador expected to have plenty of cash when he left the festival, and also to know where he was going. "I'll have to think about it," she said.

Felipe caught hold of her wrist in a crushing grip. "Get this into your dumb blond head. I get what I want and I want you. If you don't go for Nassau, that's okay with me. I still want you, and I'm not going to be put off." Suddenly he released her. "I'm a patient guy," he said. "I'm giving you until tomorrow to make up your mind how it's going to be."

V

SATURDAY

So MANY vacationers were still trying to beat the holiday rush that cars moving in both directions on the main highways rode bumper to bumper, even though it was only 7:00 a.m. The sun was a fiery ball on the horizon, and the humidity, combined with the lack of a breeze, promised that the day would be a scorcher.

Lieutenant Martin, driving on a back road to Chief Burke's office in Winthrop for a final conference, was the first to notice the sedan. It rested on the shoulder, barely off the narrow country road, and stood at a twenty-degree angle at the edge of a steep hillside. "Wow!" he cried. "Look at that one, Art."

Daniels peered at the sedan. "There are people in it!" he said.

Red pulled off the road and both officers jumped out of the cruiser. As they approached the sedan Red saw that the four occupants, two in the front seat and two in the rear, were young, black, and male. "You got a problem, fellows?" he called.

The quartet turned to stare at him. "Yeah," the driver said.

"What's happened?" Art examined the distance between the right front wheel and the edge of the sharp drop. "Another foot or two, and you'd be down there—about three hundred feet."

"We know," the driver said. "All of a sudden we heard a noise, and my steering wheel went out of whack."

Red reached in through the open window and tried the wheel, which failed to respond to his touch. "This car will need repairs. Can we give you a lift in the direction of Winthrop?"

The man beside the driver said very quickly, "Not going to Winthrop."

"Anyway," the driver added more graciously, "our friend has gone off to call a garage."

"Then you'll make out all right," Art said. He made an attempt to be friendly. "Where are you going this early in the day?"

"We're on a baseball team," one of the two in the back seat replied. "We play the Winthrop Boulevard Athletic Association."

Red was puzzled. "You said you weren't going into Winthrop."

"We're not," the driver said. "The game is in Shermanville."

Red and Art refrained from looking at each other. Shermanville was the most restricted of Winthrop's suburbs, and it was inconceivable that a black baseball team would be playing there.

Reports had been coming in all through the night of large numbers of blacks driving into Winthrop. The obvious conclusion was that they—and these men, too—were members of El Fatah. But there was nothing to be gained by arresting the occupants of the sedan. It was unlikely they knew anything beyond their own small assignments, and the state police were angling for bigger game. "Good luck," Red said with a smile as he and Art started toward the cruiser.

No one in the stalled car spoke until the cruiser vanished from sight. "Damn!" the driver said.

The other man in the front seat slapped his thigh. "One of them was a captain and the other was a lieutenant. That's a lot of brass for state pigs." He turned to the driver. "And what a dumb thing to tell them. It'll be a cold day in hell before you and me play a ball game in Shermanville!"

The man in the back seat who had remained silent throughout spoke for the first time. "That'll be enough!"

The other man immediately subsided.

"Those pigs," he said, "knew something was up. I could tell by the way their mouths got tight. Never look at a man's eyes when you want to know what he's really thinking. Watch his mouth. Now I'd better take a hike down the road to that telephone. I've got an emergency number to call, and I've an idea the council won't like it that the pigs are suspicious."


DAVIS
POLICE

TEN O'CLOCK CAME, and by 10:30 Lindsay Northrup's stomach was queasy. Perhaps he had been wrong to insist on seeing this assignment through to the end. His nerves were shot. But what bothered him most was the disappearance of Sunny Watson after she had left him yesterday afternoon. He had felt certain she would return last night, but by now he had all but given up hope.

A tap sounded at his door. It was 10:34. El Fatah was early.

"Rosey!" Diane called. "I got a message for you. Honest."

Even though she had tried to stir up trouble for him with the El Fatah high command, it might be unwise to turn her off completely. Lindsay unbolted the door, opened it a crack, and saw she was alone. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"You've been waiting for special word this morning. Well, I'm the messenger, and you're to come with me."

Lindsay hesitated. He didn't know whether Joe Borden had returned from making a phone call—or whatever his errand had been. Joe hadn't been telling him much since Lindsay had refused to obey the captain's order. On the other hand, it would be fatal to let Diane know he had reason to mistrust her. "Let's go," he said, and followed her down the stairs and into the street.

He was surprised when she turned onto John Winthrop Boulevard, the last street in town he would have imagined that El Fatah would use as a rendezvous. Then, when she started to enter an old hotel that occupied the upper part of a frame building above a store, he hesitated again. This couldn't be the meeting place of El Fatah's warriors. He looked around, but couldn't see Joe.

"Come *on*," Diane said.

Lindsay took a deep breath, then followed her into the building and up a steep flight of stairs. A door opened, and the bulk of Andy Lennox filled the frame. "You can go now," he told Diane.

"Is this the right place?" Lindsay asked.

"For you it is." The giant closed and bolted the door, then quickly frisked Lindsay for weapons. Satisfied, he said, "They're waiting for you in there."

Lindsay went into the adjoining room, and his misgivings flared into certainty that he had been wrong to come. The only furniture in the room consisted of a long table, and chairs on which sat

three men wearing black hoods. The door closed behind Lindsay.

"You're Rosey Northrup?" the man in the center asked.

"I am." Lindsay decided to take the offensive. "I didn't know there were any blacks in the Ku Klux Klan."

"If you're smart, you'll keep a civil tongue in your head," the man said. "We want the answers to a few questions, Northrup. Yesterday you were seen with a light-skinned girl. Who is she?"

"If it's anybody's business, I picked her up in a bar."

"Her name?"

"She told me it was Sally," Lindsay lied.

"Think carefully before you answer this question. Did she say or do anything to make you think she works for the state police?"

"The police? You've got to be kidding!"

"We believe she went to the state police in Hartford after leaving you yesterday. Some of our friends saw her near state police headquarters there, but lost her in traffic."

Sunny was safe; El Fatah didn't know her identity. Lindsay felt such relief that for a minute he did not register the full impact of what he had heard: El Fatah was keeping a watch on headquarters! "Man," he said, "you talk crap. If that Sally is a pig spy, so is every hooker in Winthrop! And if she's working for Charley, how come she was spending so much time with me?"

"That's precisely what we want to know, Northrup," the masked spokesman said. "You aren't being accused or judged. Yet." There was an ominous undertone in his voice. "But you've come under suspicion twice, and we can't afford to take risks."

"Neither can I!" Lindsay tried another approach. "Just give me a chance to prove myself, that's all I ask!"

"You'll have that chance tomorrow."

Lindsay's confusion was genuine. "I thought it was today that we were going to—"

"Our plans have changed. The pigs have been snoopy, so we're throwing them off the scent. Any objections?"

"Not from me. You tell me what to do, I do it and then I get paid."

"We're glad you're so agreeable, Northrup. That simplifies your problem, and you won't object to staying here until you go into action tomorrow. We'll feel safer if we know you can't squawk to

the pigs." The man picked up a bell and rang it. Andy Lennox came in, followed by another man almost as large.

"Northrup is going to be our guest until tomorrow," they were told. "Make him comfortable upstairs. If he behaves, treat him good. If he doesn't, you know what to do."

Lennox took his left arm, the other giant caught him by the right, and they half carried, half dragged Lindsay back into the outer room. "I can walk," he said. "I'm not crippled."

"Not yet," Lennox said. "But I still owe you, and don't forget it."

"I remember." Lindsay weighed his chances, and concluded that the odds against him were enormous, for obviously there were other strongmen in the building. Meanwhile he was sitting on a gold mine of information. If the attack had indeed been postponed for a day, his superiors would discover it when the deadline came and went. What they didn't know, and only he could tell them, was the location of this El Fatah nerve center.

Lennox led the way up two flights of stairs to a small attic room furnished with an old-fashioned brass bed. "We'll bring your meals to you," he said. "Anything else you want, holler. Somebody will be outside this door all day and all night."

The door shut, a bolt was slammed into place, and Lindsay was alone. Crossing to the heavily barred window, he looked out on the deserted, tarred roof of a dilapidated building across John Winthrop Boulevard. Cut off from the world and under heavy guard, he could only hope Joe had seen where Diane had led him.

THE wind out of the west freshened, carrying the first of the dark clouds that quickly obscured the sun. Fifteen minutes later the rain began to fall, increasing to a heavy downpour. Trooper Karl Roebish wiped the inside of his windshield with a cloth, and gloomily listened to his tires screech as he made a sharp turn onto the turnpike ramp. In spite of all the weekend excitement, only the most routine assignments were keeping him busy.

Traffic on the turnpike had subsided, partly because of the sudden turn in the weather, but also because most people had reached their destinations by this hour. At least Karl's thoughts wouldn't be interrupted. He wondered why he had become so

anxious to make a good showing. Normal ambition wasn't the whole story. His real reason was his desire to impress Billie—and to make good in her father's eyes. It was a shock to realize he was so in love with Billie Martin that he wanted to marry her.

A small car was parked on the shoulder on the far side of the turnpike, and Karl hit his brakes as he approached an opening in a fence that would permit him to make a U-turn. As he pulled up behind the parked car, a young man emerged and ran toward him. Karl lowered his window. "Having trouble?"

"We were heading to Sinclair Hospital in Chestnut, Officer, but my car broke down. My wife is going to have a baby."

"Get her in here!" Karl commanded, and as the man raced off, he reached for his microphone and reported to Troop R.

The dispatcher chuckled. "Looks like you're in the baby business this weekend, kid."

"Yeah," Karl said bitterly. "Isn't that great?"

LIEUTENANT Red Martin walked into the state police liaison office in the Winthrop PD headquarters and pulled up a chair beside Sergeant Michael Donovan. "Captain MacGregor is wondering whether you'd like to do him a favor. You haven't forgotten a little meeting you had not long ago?"

"Hardly." Rita Valdez wasn't the kind of girl a man forgot.

"Well, the lady wants to get together with you again."

Mike groaned.

"It's your fatal charm, Mike. Anyway, she called CID and said she has something very important to pass along. I have her address here, and you're to drop up there as soon as it gets dark. Three long rings and three short will get you into her apartment. Captain MacGregor says she sounded excited—and kind of upset. You go in uniform. The captain was very specific about that."

Mike whistled under his breath.

"At least you'll be armed, if that's any consolation."

"It'll have to be," Mike said. "A trooper in uniform visits a Cosa Nostra dame. It doesn't make sense."

"No, but it looks like you'll have a livelier evening than the rest of us," Red said. "It begins to appear that El Fatah has had a

change of mind about staging fireworks. The motorcycle gangs have forgotten about their war in Chestnut. And this rain ought to dampen the fuses of those kids up at Pine Lodge Lake."

THE driving rain that smeared the windows depressed Emily Martin beyond measure. She sat at the kitchen table, letting her coffee grow cold. Her husband's final words kept coming back to her, and she couldn't help speculating on the sort of life she would lead if they were divorced. They could live a block or two apart in the same town and never set eyes on each other.

Could she separate herself from him emotionally to that extent? Would a few words mumbled in a courtroom make her indifferent to the possibility that he risked injury and even death because of his stubborn conviction that the entire structure of law enforcement would collapse if he removed himself from the battle?

At first, Emily knew, she would continue to worry about him, but that was habit. In time, perhaps, she might drift away from him, but the thought increased her sense of desolation. She knew she needed to explore the whole subject. It was absurd to go on as she had, resenting the work he so obviously loved.

But she couldn't think about herself when her mind was filled with other problems. Myra, for instance. The realization that the girl was being exposed to this rainstorm was driving her up the wall. However, it was wrong to blame Harlow for Myra's situation. It was Myra who had gotten herself involved with idiots who used drugs and ran around naked.

As for Billie, instinct warned Emily not to try too hard to discourage the romance with that young trooper. It would be wiser to maintain a gentle pressure while awaiting an opportunity to intervene. What Billie wouldn't understand was that Emily's only motive was a desire to save her daughter from a lifetime of loneliness, fear, and uncertainty. This very weekend should be an eye-opener to the hazards of being a trooper's wife.

RED Martin left Pine Lodge Lake and sped toward Chestnut at an eighty-mile-an-hour clip. He had to pass the turnpike exit that led to his own house, but he resisted the temptation to stop off for

a few minutes. It would be time enough, when he finally went home Monday night, to find out whether two decades of marriage had gone down the drain. He was determined that Emily make up her own mind. If she really found life with a trooper intolerable, she ought to get out. What he hated to admit to himself was that if Emily left him, he wouldn't really care what he did.

Before Red realized it, he was rolling down Chestnut's Main Street. He parked behind the municipal building, then climbed to the second-floor headquarters of the Chestnut Police Department. Chief Tom Bowers rose from his desk and shook hands. "Haven't you got anything better to do in this kind of weather than drive around the countryside?"

"Sitting around Winthrop gives me the creeps, and so does watching the rain come down at Pine Lodge Lake," Red said. "But it seems that the rain washed out your motorcycle-gang war, at least for today."

"I don't believe there was going to be any war," Bowers said. "The local hotshots are either at the beach or in their homes."

"Maybe the leather-and-wheels boys were tipped off that we had a reception party or two planned for today."

Bowers stared at Red. "I hope you aren't hinting that somebody in this department tipped them off."

Red shook his head. "That idea didn't cross my mind." He waved at the framed, autographed photos on the wall. "Nice picture of the governor. But your Mayor Blasington looks like an unhappy gent. I see he signs himself as your good friend. Is he?"

"Yes and no," Bowers said with candor. "We play poker together every Friday night, along with the city director of health, the mayor's executive assistant, and the city attorney. You know how it is. I've got to play along with the politicians."

"Did you have your regular game last night?"

"Yes, we did. At the mayor's house."

"Blasington's boy wasn't around, by any chance?"

Chief Bowers frowned. "Now that you mention it, he helped his mother fix us sandwiches and coffee."

"What kind of a kid is he?"

"He looks like all the rest. You know, long hair, T-shirt, jeans.

But he's polite, which is more than I can say for some of them."

"If you had looked in the mayor's garage, you'd have seen the boy's new motorcycle. An imported beauty."

Bowers sprang to his feet. "What are you saying, for God's sake?"

"He cracked up his old one in Winthrop earlier this summer, when he and his pals were on their way to a rumble north of Shermanville. You remember that scrap—five boys were hurt. Well, the Blasington boy missed it because he ran his motorcycle into a telephone pole three blocks from the Winthrop PD. When the investigating officer found out the kid's identity, Mayor Shaw of Winthrop was notified. As a courtesy. You know how these politicians are. The notation of the accident disappeared from the desk sergeant's blotter, and nobody asked any questions."

"Good God!" Bowers buried his face in his hands.

"Paul Burke of the Winthrop PD mentioned the case today. As though I knew all about it, which I didn't. And when the rumble failed to come off by noon, I started adding one and one, and got two. Mayor Blasington knew about our plans for breaking up the gang war today?"

"Naturally. It's my job to keep him informed!" Bowers stared at the photograph of the mayor. "For all I know, I may have said something to him during the game last night, and if his son was eavesdropping—"

"Don't start blaming yourself, Tom. The boy could have picked up the information in any one of a dozen ways."

"All right. But how do I tell my boss that his only son is a punk, and that he'll get the book thrown at him if this gang war erupts?"

"I know what I'd do," Red said. "I'd suggest to the mayor that he forbid his son the use of his motorbike until the whole business is cleared up. If Blasington knows nothing about his son's activities, he'll be grateful to you for a sensible suggestion. But if he's wise to the kid, you'll be giving him a valuable tip while allowing him to save face. How does that sound?"

"So good that I wonder why you don't become the commissioner of a big local PD somewhere!"

"Not me, thanks," Red said. "I'd rather stay a simpleminded trooper and never have to think about politicians."

THE RAIN ENDED around 5:00 p.m., the sun came out, and by sundown, thanks to a brisk, steady wind, the ground was fairly dry again. At Pine Lodge Lake the festival had reached its climax, and seventy thousand young fans were crammed into every available inch of the natural amphitheater to hear one rock group after another play and sing.

But Annie Kirkland was heartily sick of it all. Chilled and damp after the rain, she wanted a hot meal, an hour's soak in a tub, and then an uninterrupted night in her own bed. In the meantime, with her bivouac area deserted, she could at least catch a little sleep. The ground was hard, to be sure, with only an oilcloth and half of her blanket beneath her, but gradually she drifted off.

Suddenly jarred wide-awake, she looked up and saw the face of Felipe Magador a few inches from her own. She tried to scream, but his mouth covered hers, and she could make only a few strangled sounds. Her knowledge of karate was useless because Felipe had pinned her down with the finesse of a wrestler. Besides, if she resorted to violence, she would not put it past him to disfigure her with his switchblade. She would have to let him make love to her with as much grace as she could muster. As he caressed her she closed her eyes. . . .

All at once the lovemaking halted.

Annie opened her eyes again, and saw a flicker of shame in Magador's face. It dawned on her with a shock of relief that he was impotent.

"I guess," he muttered, "this outdoor stuff isn't for me."

She forced a smile. "This hard ground isn't my idea of heaven, either. I prefer a bed with springs and a thick mattress."

"Now," he said, getting up, "you're making my kind of talk."

"If you weren't handing me a line," Annie said, tugging her clothes into place, "that Nassau trip is going to be something."

"Let's make it a big trip, maybe a couple of weeks." He took a joint from his shirt pocket and lit it. "Some friends of mine own a great hotel there. Wait'll you see how you look when we get you tricked out in some jazzy new outfits."

Annie found it difficult to picture herself as the overdressed mistress of a gangster. Perhaps she ought to feel offended that she

had been offered a place as a kept woman by a member of the mob, but actually she found it amusing, and even flattering. She stood, smoothed her shorts, and returned Felipe's admiring gaze. "You've offered me something I'll never forget," she said, and when she saw his genuine smile of pleasure it occurred to her with amazement that she actually felt sorry for him.

THE sunken living room was crammed with heavy, expensive furniture and enormous lamps, but Rita Valdez looked at home there. An uncomfortable Mike Donovan shifted in his tufted-leather chair, trying not to stare as she stood before him in a green silk hostess gown slit to reveal her long legs. "I'm sure you could use a highball," she said.

"No, thanks. I'm on duty," he said. "I could be fired for drinking in uniform."

The girl shrugged, went to the bar, and poured herself a stiff bourbon on the rocks. "You look different in your uniform," she said, returning and perching opposite him on the arm of a sofa.

"I didn't want to embarrass you by showing up in uniform, but they said it didn't matter."

"Why should I mind?"

"Aren't you afraid your pals might see you with a trooper?"

"Oh, I'm not worried about Felipe anymore. I have an idea that he'll be too busy marching in and out of a cell for the next few years to keep tabs on me." Her laugh was metallic. "And it's thanks to you. So a friend of mine and I want to return the favor."

"Who is that?"

Rita hesitated. "Let's just say he's—somebody who is becoming a very good friend. He followed me when I got together with you, and he guessed the reason. I thought I was going to be in real trouble, but it wasn't like that at all." She sipped her drink, then smiled. "How was I to know he admired me all this time?"

So she had a new protector now, Mike thought. "Is your friend a business associate of Magador's?"

"You might call him a former associate."

"I see. Men in the rackets aren't known for doing favors for troopers."

"My friend," Rita said, "is different." She picked up a cigarette and lit it. "Did you ever hear of the Black Mafia?"

"There is no such animal," Mike said. "It's just a name people use when they mean local gangs of black criminals."

"There's one organization that isn't just local. El Fatah."

He sat erect in his chair.

"I thought that would grab you. How do you think they get the money to build themselves up all over the country? By muscling in on the numbers racket, gambling, all sorts of businesses where other people have had a monopoly for a long time."

For the first time Mike realized he might be onto something big. "You mean El Fatah has been cutting itself in on some lucrative operations that have belonged to—ah—your friends."

Rita nodded. "The people I know have been very resentful, but they know there's more than one way to get rid of enemies." She rose and stood before him in a dramatic pose. "How would you like to round up the whole top brass of El Fatah?"

The last piece of the puzzle had dropped into place. Rita's Cosa Nostra friend and his superiors had selected him as the instrument through whom they could put El Fatah out of business.

"I mean it," she said. "Their brass is meeting right here in Winthrop this weekend."

Mike's throat felt tight, and his temples pounded.

"They're coming in by way of Albany, and they're using back roads so they won't call attention to themselves. So," she concluded triumphantly, "my friend says that if you wait until tomorrow morning, you can get them all."

"Where?"

"They have headquarters for the weekend in a fleabag hotel on John Winthrop Boulevard. Is that a help?"

"A great help." He stood, hitching up his gun belt. "In fact, this information is so hot I'd better take it to my bosses before it melts."

THE boredom of confinement far outweighed the dangers, Lindsay Northrup decided. He had forced himself to eat the dinner a dour guard had brought, and then the silence of inactivity had settled in again. Lindsay could understand why convicts

sometimes went mad. Stretched out on the creaking bed, he went over the situation again.

One of the worst handicaps that every law-enforcement agency had been facing in dealing with El Fatah was the lack of any hard information about the organization's top hierarchy. El Fatah had demonstrated a maddening cleverness. Those who worked on each level knew only one person on the next rung up the ladder, and the few members who had been persuaded to talk had revealed almost nothing about their superiors.

Yet here was Lindsay Northrup, actually in the same building as the men who were driving El Fatah into a headlong confrontation with the country's combined police authorities. The sooner he was found, the sooner they would be able to act on the priceless information he had uncovered.

Impatiently he hauled himself to his feet and went to the window for the hundredth time. The rain had stopped hours earlier, and neon signs were blazing in the shopwindows below. A bright, partial moon was shining, and the sky was filled with stars.

Suddenly his attention was caught by two workmen on the roof of the building directly across the street. Saturday night was a strange time to be making repairs to a roof. He peered more intently at the two men in dungarees, and his heart pounded when he recognized a corporal who had been one of his instructors at the academy. Both men were troopers, he felt certain.

He had no idea how they had learned his whereabouts, but now it was important to let them know he had identified them. He opened the window and gestured wildly, but the pair, seemingly intent on measuring strips of roofing material, did not glance up.

Maybe a lighted match would do the trick. He took a pack from his pocket and lit one, shielding it from the faint breeze as he moved it slowly back and forth. This time the corporal seemed to look up. Alternately placing his free hand in front of the match, then removing it, Lindsay gave the state police distress signal—two long exposures of light, followed by two short and two more long. The corporal gave no sign he had seen anything.

Then the second of the supposed workmen tried to light a cigarette with a small lighter, and Lindsay held his breath. A

flame shot up and was extinguished by the wind, then the process was repeated. Twice more the lighter flared, but for briefer spans, and then came two longer flares, on the last of which he managed to light his cigarette.

Lindsay felt so weak he leaned against the wall. His signal had been duly noted, and his comrades knew where to find him.

CAPTAINS Daniels and MacGregor were looking over the shoulders of Lieutenant Red Martin, who sat at a desk in the temporary state police headquarters in the offices of the Winthrop Police Department. He was drawing a map, and all three were so absorbed that they failed to hear the door open as Commissioner Chance joined them.

"The Winthrop PD has stationed plainclothesmen in unmarked cars on every road leading into the city," Red said. "But the El Fatah leaders who are coming in tomorrow morning could still slip through the roadblocks. So I'm forced to agree with the FBI that we seal off the area around the old hotel, and close the trap when the latecomers arrive."

"Suppose some of the men now in the building try to leave?" the commissioner asked.

Max MacGregor was the first to recover from his surprise. "Boss," he said, "if a mosquito tried to get out of that cordon, we'd swat it. I've put thirty men in civvies around the block, the FBI has moved in another twenty-four, and there are a dozen from other federal agencies."

"Who is in charge?"

MacGregor bristled. "I am, sir! I let the federal people join us on the condition they understand this is our show. Nobody makes an arrest of any El Fatah leader without our specific okay in advance. If there's a foul-up, I'll take the blame."

Ed Chance's faint smile was the only sign that he approved of the arrangements, but his subordinates knew they had his complete support. "Art, what shifts have you made in your manpower dispositions?" the commissioner asked.

"That's what we were checking when you came in, sir," Art Daniels said. "There's been no sign of a motorcycle-gang fight in

Chestnut, so I've cleaned out that detail and instructed the troopers on highway patrol in the area to keep a sharp watch. The youngsters up at the rock festival are behaving, and I've cut there, too, though I can't do with less than forty men."

The commissioner frowned. "Forty's a lot of manpower."

"That's because we have to cover eleven entrances, sir."

"My undercover people," MacGregor interrupted, "have enough evidence to make ten to fifteen arrests, Commissioner. We don't want any of those operators to slip through our hands."

"There's no need to become defensive, gentlemen," Chance said. "I'm taking full responsibility for this juggling act. I realize we're taking a frightful risk by concentrating most of our available personnel in Winthrop. Between us, I couldn't logically defend our assignments if Governor Trindle or the legislature appointed a board of inquiry."

"That's not quite true, Commissioner," Art Daniels said. "We know that Winthrop is El Fatah's target—"

"No, Art," his superior cut in. "We *know* only that we've had a reliable tip that the El Fatah command is convening here. That isn't enough to justify, say, blowing up their command post."

"That's a good thing," MacGregor said. "Even if we knew for certain they're planning to riot in Winthrop tomorrow, we couldn't blow up the place. Because one of my undercover agents—Trooper Lindsay Northrup—is inside the building right this minute."

The commissioner's iron discipline cracked. "What in God's name is one of your men doing there, Max?"

"As nearly as we can tell, he managed to penetrate their defenses, and then got himself stuck there." MacGregor was grim. "This is one weekend that can't end fast enough to suit me!"

VI

SUNDAY

COMMISSIONER Chance slept for a few hours on a cot in the Winthrop Police Department headquarters, and then established his operations center in a large office that Chief Burke made available to him. Major Emil Schneider went to work there at dawn,

aided by two sergeants, one of whom covered the telephones while the other monitored the Teletype machines that had been set up to provide communication with state police posts. And at 8:00 a.m. Captain Daniels and Lieutenant Martin arrived.

At 9:33 a.m. a report came in that a car occupied by two men and bearing a Pennsylvania license was approaching the old hotel on John Winthrop Boulevard. Detectives in civilian clothes who were hiding across the street took photographs of the pair as they entered the building.

"It looks like another of our birds has come to roost," Emil Schneider said, chewing nervously on the unlighted stub of a cigar.

"That leaves one still to go, if our information is accurate," the commissioner remarked.

Art Daniels hitched up his pistol belt. "We can make a good haul any time we close in," he said. "I hate to wait."

"I agree," the major said. "If we take the whole El Fatah leadership except for one, we're doing plenty okay."

"Why the rush?" Chance demanded. "Even a magician couldn't get away from us down there. We have that square block surrounded by more than two hundred operatives. I'm aiming for a hundred percent capture of the El Fatah hierarchy."

His subordinates exchanged glances. "Assuming the missing man doesn't show up and there are no disturbances of the peace, Commissioner," Red Martin asked, "how long do you plan to wait?"

"How would noon strike you, Red?"

Red Martin was not one to mince words. "Too damn long, sir!"

"If we take the El Fatah leaders into custody right this minute, the state will have a questionable case against them," Chance said. "They've committed no crimes here. They haven't issued a direct threat to a Connecticut city. The federal people might have more of a chance to nail them, but there are all sorts of holes in their case, too."

"What you're suggesting," Red said, "is that we hold off in the hope they'll try to spark a riot or engage in some other act of violence between now and noon."

"I'm afraid that's precisely what I'm planning to do—and at the same time hoping we can contain the violence without casualties."

SUNDAY'S FIRST concert was scheduled for the afternoon, so the huge crowd at Pine Lodge Lake had nothing to do from the time the early risers began to stir, around 9:00 a.m. Many couples killed time by wandering off into the woods. But the majority sat or stood in listless groups, engaging in desultory conversation and glancing repeatedly at their watches. Trooper Annie Kirkland lingered at the coffee stand, surveying the scene with concern.

"Hi!" Gladys Whitman greeted her, coming up to join her.

"I don't like this one bit," Annie said. "These kids are at loose ends, so they're growing edgy."

Gladys nodded. "It feels the way it did in Hartford last year just before the big riots broke loose."

Apparently strolling aimlessly through the grounds, they continued to judge the temper and mood of the crowd. To a trained observer the young people laughed too quickly and loudly, their restlessness became more intense as their boredom increased, and they were ripe for anything that promised excitement.

Returning to their own campsite, Annie was annoyed when she saw Myra Martin and one of her friends stretched out on blankets, smoking. The odor of marijuana was unmistakable.

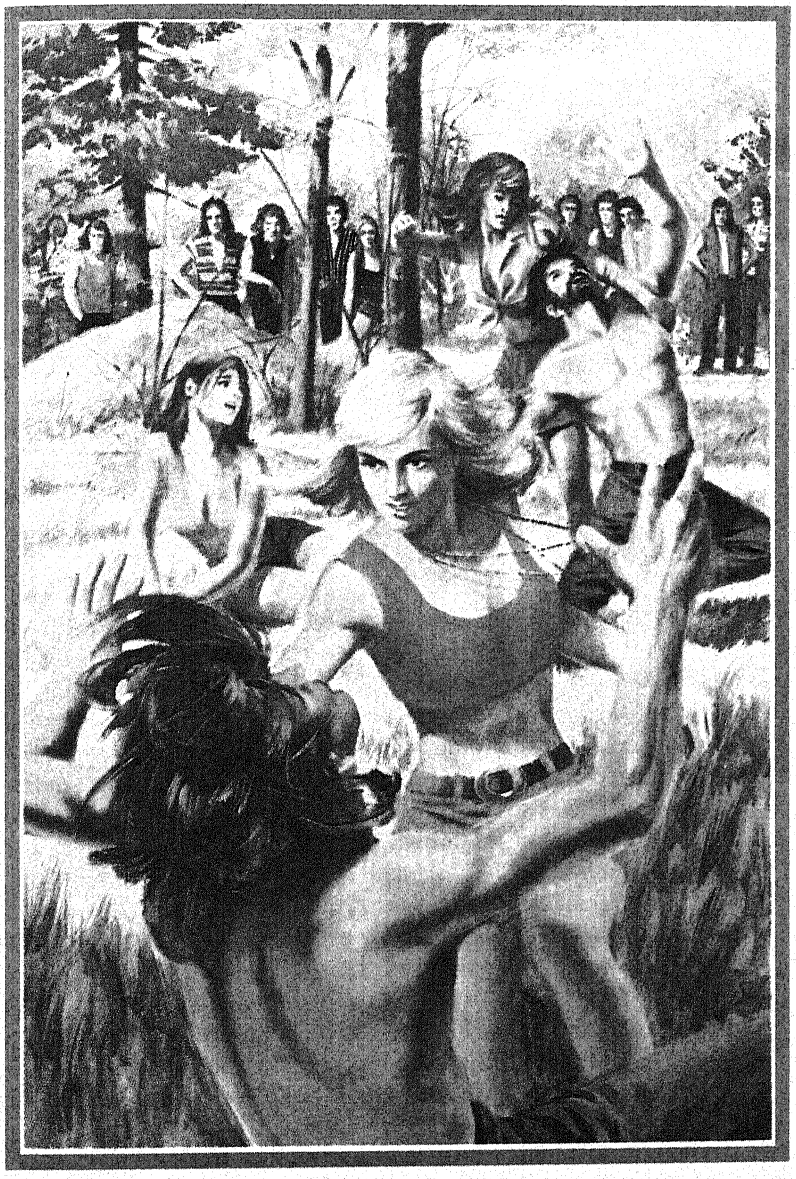
Annie debated whether to intervene, but as she stood trying to make up her mind, the situation suddenly went out of control. Five young men clad only in pants meandered into the clearing, stopping abruptly when they saw the two girls stretched out before them. One shouted, "The tall one is mine!"

"The hell she is!" another retorted, and sprinted toward Myra.

Within seconds the quintet fell upon the unsuspecting girls with the obvious intention of stripping them. A crowd began to gather.

With one accord Annie and Gladys pushed through the crowd, Annie going to Myra's assistance and Gladys to the other girl's. Hauling the taller of Myra's attackers to his feet, Annie caught him off-balance with short, chopping blows. Blood spurted from his nose as he staggered backward and collapsed against a tree.

The second of Myra's attackers obviously had some knowledge of karate. He launched a kick at Annie's head as she turned toward him. She sidestepped, then almost simultaneously moved forward. The side of her hand struck his Adam's apple, and she made short



work of him, driving him to his knees with several quick blows, then felling him with a karate kick on the side of the head.

By this time Gladys had disposed of two of the other attackers, and the fifth man had bolted, to hoots of derision from the spectators. But the victory had been so spectacular that a new danger arose. Many in the crowd were now spoiling for a fight.

"We may be in for it," Gladys said, then added to Myra and her friend, "Don't run away, or the whole crowd will be after you. Stay behind us!"

A sudden fear seized Annie as she saw the crowd being transformed into an ugly, unreasoning mob. "Marshals!" she shouted.

A number of men responded to her call, and she was astonished to find Felipe Magador by her side. "Baby," he said with a smile, "I'd sure hate to have you take off after me." Reaching inside his windbreaker, he drew out a snub-nosed .38 revolver.

"Don't shoot!" Annie told him. "If you kill somebody, there'll be real trouble!"

"Don't worry about me." He grasped the weapon by the barrel. "Where I grew up we had free-for-alls every day."

The nine or ten young men who had come to the assistance of the girls instinctively formed a semicircle as they faced a mob of fifty to seventy-five, shouting insults. Only quick, concerted action could prevent a riot. "We'll make them come to us," Gladys said. "Hold this line steady, and concentrate on one at a time. Pay no attention to any of them except those in the first rush!"

The advice was sound, Annie knew. If the initial attackers were repulsed, the rest of the crowd would lose its appetite for a fight.

"Here they come!" Felipe said, laughing as he stood with his feet apart, braced for the assault. Annie was surprised to discover that she not only felt reassured by his presence but actually looked forward to facing the mob with him.

There were at least twenty-five in the vanguard of the crowd, and several had armed themselves with baseball bats and heavy sticks. But Annie had no doubt about the outcome, provided the majority on her side did not panic; and the best way to ensure their courage was to set them an example.

She laughed loudly and scornfully, instantly becoming a focal

point of attention. Felipe's grin broadened. "You want to make sure we have some fun, huh? I'll give you ten to one I take care of more of them than you do."

"You're on," Annie said, as the attackers swept toward the little band. A broad-shouldered bruiser was headed straight for her, icy hatred in his eyes. "That one," she told Felipe, "is mine."

Waiting until the young giant was almost within reach, Annie leaped into the air and landed a karate kick on the side of his neck. He was stunned and stopped short. But she gave him no chance to recover. A second kick caught him in the pit of the stomach, doubling him over, and she made short work of him with her hands, chopping repeatedly at his face and body. In spite of his size he was no match for her, and at last he toppled to the grass.

"Not bad," Felipe said, "but I'm one up on you—and now it'll be two." One youth lay crumpled at his feet, and another was crawling away. Felipe lashed out at a third young man, using the butt of his pistol as a club; it landed with a sickening thud against the man's temple, and he dropped to the ground.

All at once the battle was over as the attackers melted back into the crowd. "We're here to make peace, not war!" Annie shouted. "Let's just have fun, everybody!"

A jazz band, hastily assembled by the promoters, was now playing in the amphitheater, and Annie's seeming good humor was the final touch needed to disperse the throng. Felipe returned his pistol to its holster. "I won, fair and square," he said. "So we'll give ourselves an extra couple of weeks on our trip. You and your pal did okay." His admiration included Gladys. Now that he was aware of her, both girls realized, it would be impossible for her to keep him under surveillance.

Felipe grinned at them. "Where did a couple of neat chicks like you learn to make like amazons?"

Annie had been dreading just such a question. "Well, we're nurses," she said. "We have to be able to look out for ourselves."

He appeared satisfied. "Just don't try your tricks on me."

Annie's eyes met his, and again she felt a stab of compassion for a man who was doomed to a way of life that offered no hope of rehabilitation. "You know I won't," she said.

Felipe blinked; women rarely showed him sympathy, and he didn't know how to react. "I've got some work to do," he said gruffly, "and then maybe I can rustle up a bottle of wine with lunch. Bring your pal along, and we'll celebrate." He left quickly.

"Well," Gladys said, glancing sharply at Annie.

But Annie had no wish to discuss Felipe Magador. She turned instead to Myra and her friend. Both of the teen-agers, their faces tear-stained, were trying to repair the damage to their clothes.

"Do you kids realize what a close call you had?" Annie said.

Myra nodded. "What happened was bad enough. Please don't lecture us."

"No lectures and no discussion. You're going home. Now."

Myra and her friend looked as though a great burden had been lifted from them. They began to gather their belongings.

"I'll take them to the gate," Annie told Gladys. "I don't think there will be any more trouble, but I wish you'd come with me."

"Sure. I can't help wondering if we've blown our cover," Gladys said. "Word is sure to get around that you and I know karate, and some of these smart pushers may put two and two together. Maybe we ought to split, too."

Annie weighed the suggestion. "That's just what pushers would expect undercover agents to do, and if any of them started to miss us they might get rid of the rest of their drugs and bury the cash until later. It seems to me the best way to avoid suspicion is to stay and act as though nothing has happened."

"We'll have to drop out of the surveillance teams for sure."

"I suppose we will. But at least we can salvage the work we've already done. Between us we've gathered enough evidence to send Magador and several others to prison."

Gladys cocked an eyebrow. "I wasn't so sure you still wanted to put the finger on Magador."

"Just because I feel sorry for him doesn't mean I'm willing to close my eyes to the laws he's breaking."

ALL troopers, FBI agents, and others who formed the cordon around the old hotel in the Winthrop ghetto had been issued a new code to use on shortwave transmission, but had been given strict

instructions to stay off the air until they had information of importance to pass along to the command center. As every law-enforcement officer knew, anyone who made a business of crime owned a receiving set that could tune in on police wavelengths.

The chief inspector of the Winthrop Police Department and a deputy regional director of the FBI had stationed themselves before an electronic console in the communications center at the rear of the Winthrop police headquarters. When Red Martin came into the room he heard no sound but the console's low, steady hum.

The FBI man looked up in disgust. "It's almost noon. If we don't get a little activity soon, I'm going to be forced to ask Washington for permission to move my men in for the kill. Then you fellows can either join us or watch from the sidelines."

A sudden crackling of the amplified speakers prevented Red from making an angry retort. A voice came on the air and announced in code that a five-passenger sedan had pulled up in front of the old hotel. Apparently the car was waiting for someone.

"Tell Sergeant Donovan to stand by," Red said. "Whenever that car leaves the hotel, I want all three of his cruisers to follow it out of the immediate vicinity, and then close in." He couldn't help smiling as he glanced at the FBI man.

A trooper came to the door. "We just had a call from Dick Duncan, up at Pine Lodge Lake, Lieutenant. He says your daughter and another kid have left the fandango. Trooper Kirkland and Trooper Whitman brought them as far as the gate."

Red's legs felt weak with relief. "Where are they now?"

"Captain Daniels took the call, sir, and he told Duncan to hold them in temporary protective custody until somebody can give them a ride home in a cruiser."

"Good. Do me a favor, will you, Bill? Ask Captain Daniels to call my wife and pass along the news." With action in the El Fatah case imminent, he had no choice but to stay near the two-way radio equipment.

As EMILY walked into the house, the telephone was ringing. She picked it up and a voice said, "Em? Art Daniels. We've got great news for you! A couple of our people persuaded Myra and a

friend to leave the festival. They're outside the grounds right now, waiting for transportation home."

Emily caught her breath. "Thank God. Is she—all right?"

"So we understand."

"I'm sorry Harlow didn't see fit to let me know himself." Even as she spoke she knew she was being unreasonable. She had been out; it was likely that he had tried to reach her.

She had chosen the wrong man on whom to vent her frustrations. "Your husband," Art said with cold deliberation, "is carrying a heavy burden of responsibility. Hundreds of lives depend on the decisions he's making today. Even so, he thought of you first, and made sure you were notified without delay."

She heard him slam the telephone into its cradle. She had gone too far, she realized. Instead of expressing gratitude because of Myra's escape from the festival, she had stupidly reamed out a man whose respect she wanted and whose goodwill was essential to Harlow's future as a trooper. The sudden realization that she was floundering, that she didn't know how to make amends, frightened her.

THE carillon in the belfry of the First Congregational Church was chiming noon when the door of Lindsay Northrup's room opened to reveal two burly guards in dungarees on the threshold. Both were strangers, and he braced himself.

"Let's go!" one of them said. He handed Lindsay a green armband similar to those which he and his companion wore.

Slipping the cloth circlet over his arm, Lindsay fell in between them, and they started down the stairs. The third floor of the hotel was deserted, but on the second-floor landing Lindsay could hear voices behind a closed door. Presumably some members of the El Fatah hierarchy were still in the place.

Downstairs a silent Andy Lennox awaited the trio inside the front door. Not even glancing in Lindsay's direction, he handed pistols to each of the others. They hid the weapons in their belts, beneath hanging shirttails, and shoved Lindsay through the door to a waiting sedan. Lennox sat in the front seat, and Lindsay found himself wedged between the other two in the rear.

"What is all this?" he demanded as the driver pulled away. "I've been locked up like I committed some kind of a crime, and now you haven't given me a gun for the big fight. How come?"

The driver, who appeared to be in charge, looked at him briefly in the rearview mirror. "The general thought you might resent the way you've been treated and have a hankering to use a gun on us. I've got an East German automatic for you, and I'll hand it over to you as soon as we reach our assembly area."

Lindsay felt somewhat relieved. "Where is this assembly area?"

"There's a number of spots," the driver said. "Our battalion will start from Christ Church. You know the place."

"Sure," Lindsay said, "across from the old Spooner mills." His mind racing, he realized that he had grossly underestimated El Fatah's strength. He had no idea how many men might comprise what they called a battalion, but even if they were exaggerating, their entire force might number in the hundreds.

Traffic was exceptionally heavy, and the sedan crawled to the corner, where it was forced to halt at a stoplight. An old convertible occupied by two black men crept to a stop beside it, and Lindsay glanced in their direction, then quickly turned away. He didn't know the driver, but the other man was Sergeant Dave Howard, an operations director on Captain MacGregor's staff.

Traffic crawled to the next corner, where they were halted by another light. Lindsay turned and saw out of the corner of his eye that the convertible was now directly behind them.

"We better get off this boulevard," Andy Lennox said, "or we're gonna be too late for the party."

"I'm turning off here," the driver said. "We'll make it all right, so relax, Lennox. I'm the commander of this platoon."

Amused that a group of five would be called a platoon in the El Fatah force, Lindsay guessed that the strike was scheduled for 12:15 p.m. The sedan turned onto Cherry Street, where the sidewalks were crowded with families in their Sunday clothes, walking to late services at the four churches that faced the Winthrop Common.

Suddenly a blue cruiser marked STATE POLICE turned onto Cherry Street from the opposite direction, and maneuvered to block the

thoroughfare. At the same moment the convertible pulled abreast of the sedan, crowding it toward the curb, and a third car, of which Lindsay had been unaware, came up behind the sedan.

"What the hell is this?" the sedan's driver demanded loudly.

Lindsay concealed a smile of relief. When Captain MacGregor rescued an agent, he did things in a big way.

Bystanders scattered when they saw the sedan being surrounded by uniformed troopers. Lindsay recognized Sergeant Mike Donovan of Troop R. Halting a few feet from the car, Donovan called, "Come out slowly, one at a time, and don't try any tricks!"

The driver of the sedan tried to stall. "What have we done wrong?" he asked.

"Do as you're told!" a short, black trooper ordered, and Lindsay recognized Joe Borden's voice.

"Are you workin' with the pigs, Rosey?" an outraged Andy Lennox demanded, and reached for the pistol in his belt.

Without waiting for help from the troopers, Lindsay threw himself at the giant, diving over the seat for the right hand that was groping for the pistol. He seized Lennox's wrist, and as the two men grappled in the cramped space, the car doors were wrenched open. Mike Donovan hauled the driver into the street, disarming him and snapping a pair of handcuffs on his wrists. The pair in the back seat surrendered without protest.

Meanwhile Lindsay and Andy Lennox, punching and kicking, tumbled out onto the asphalt. "Hold still for a minute so we can take him," one of the troopers called.

"That Northrup will do just fine," Joe Borden said.

Lindsay's fist smashed into his foe's face. "How many times must I do this before you learn you can't beat me, Lennox?" He panted, then looked up. "Anybody got a spare pair of cuffs?"

Lennox was hauled to his feet, handcuffed, and disarmed, and the fight was ended. Then Lindsay drew Mike aside. "Thanks for the rescue, Sergeant, but what you'd better know is that the El Fatah brass is gathered back there at the hotel—"

"We know," Mike said. "And you were a bonus, Northrup. We didn't expect you to be in this car. Better get rid of that blood on your face while I report." He hurried toward the cruiser.

Lindsay raced after him. "Tell headquarters El Fatah is assembling what they call a battalion at Christ Church, Afro-American, opposite the old Spooner mills. It's just one rendezvous point. I don't know the others."

Mike spoke into a hand microphone, and a metallic voice replied. "The commissioner's compliments to Trooper Northrup, and tell him to try to stay out of trouble for the rest of the day."

Andy Lennox, who was being bundled into the back seat, glared at Lindsay. "So Diane was right about you, Rosey. All along. She kept sayin' you're a pig!"

Lindsay made no reply as he slipped Lennox's .38 automatic into his belt and pocketed several clips of ammunition. "I have an idea the fun is just beginning," he murmured to Joe Borden.

Even as he spoke they heard sounds of a commotion coming from the direction of the Common, and soon a steady stream of men, women, and children, whites and blacks, hurried down Cherry Street from the little park. A black Winthrop PD patrolman raced toward the cruisers. "Who's in charge of this detail?"

Joe jerked his thumb in the direction of the sergeant.

The patrolman joined Donovan in the cruiser, speaking rapidly, and soon Mike was using his microphone again. When he emerged from the car his face was grim.

"El Fatah," he said, "has pulled a real stunt. They have hundreds of men pouring into the Common, making hostages of the crowds that were attending church and forcing others to join them at gunpoint. The El Fatah headquarters is being raided now—and our main force is converging on the Common. Sergeant Howard, take the prisoners to the lockup and then rejoin me."

Lindsay followed Donovan to the cruiser. "What are my orders, Sergeant?"

"It appears they forgot about you in the excitement, Northrup, but you can come with me. You're resourceful and you can shoot—and those are qualities we're going to need!"

Captain Art Daniels led the raid on the old hotel, coordinating the efforts of his state police detail, the FBI detachment, and a squad of city police. Their success startled even the most optimistic

of them. Not a shot was fired, the bodyguards in the building offered no resistance, and eleven El Fatah leaders quietly surrendered. The prisoners were taken to the state courthouse, where interrogation began without delay.

The El Fatah leaders were remarkably cheerful, and freely explained the workings of their organization. Their goal, they declared, was to take possession of a state, presumably Connecticut, expelling all white residents. With that accomplished, they would secede from the Union and establish their own nation. The most astonishing aspect of their plan was that they took it for granted that every black in the United States would immediately move to Connecticut.

There was a reason for their optimism. The sounds of cheers and booming loudspeakers that could be heard from the Common meant that the move to capture Winthrop was progressing on schedule. The El Fatah leaders confidently awaited their release.

But Commissioner Chance had ideas of his own on the matter. Accompanied by Major Schneider and Lieutenant Martin, he hurried to the command post that Sergeant Donovan had established on the southeast corner of the Common. El Fatah militants had taken possession of the four churches that stood at the north end of the park, and men armed with pistols, rifles, and submachine guns guarded every church entrance, and had set up a defense line, using the churchgoers' automobiles as shields.

"As nearly as we've been able to estimate," Mike Donovan said, "they have about five hundred men, including gunners in the church steeples."

The commissioner stood beside his limousine, scanning the Common. "How many hostages are they holding in the churches?"

"A reasonable guess might be about fifteen hundred," Red Martin said, "including those being held in the black church. I doubt that El Fatah expected any opposition from that congregation, but it looks as though there *was* resistance, so they've had to post guards there, too."

Major Schneider, who had been sitting in a cruiser, receiving radio reports, climbed out and joined them. "We've sealed off the area, Commissioner," he said. "We've thrown an airtight cordon

around ten square blocks, and the Winthrop PD is evacuating residents from the block behind the churches. Nobody can get out—or in. We have enough men there until we get reinforcements. The towns in the area are already responding—fifty men are on the way from Chestnut, thirty from Winthrop Heights, and another dozen from Chestnut Hills. The smaller towns are sending all they can spare, and we're expecting one hundred to two hundred each from New Haven, Bridgeport, and Hartford to be here in an hour."

"Fair enough. Martin, how large is your mobile force?"

"Not counting those in the cordon, I can put three hundred and twenty-six men into the Common right away, Commissioner."

"So we'll be outnumbered, for the present, if our estimates of El Fatah's strength are reasonably accurate."

Red Martin's smile was tight. "Three hundred and twenty-six troopers can handle a lot of irregulars, Commissioner."

Mike Donovan approached and saluted. "Excuse the interruption, sir, but the press is screaming for an interview, and the television people want to put up camera equipment on the Common."

The commissioner looked toward a gesticulating group gathered beyond the police barriers. "They'll have to wait. I don't want to set off any sparks that will get those hostages killed."

Major Schneider, who had rushed back to his cruiser, reappeared at his superior's elbow. "Captain Fowler of Emergency Services requests permission to move his tanks into the Common, sir."

The commissioner shook his head. "El Fatah might panic if they see the tanks. I want to save them until the right moment."

A trooper standing on the grass of the Common called out to the commissioner and pointed. A group of five men had appeared on the north side of the clearing, one of them carrying a white banner.

"Now we'll find out what they want," Ed Chance said. "Emil, Red, come with me. Borden, fix up a white flag and act as our escort." Joe Borden grinned, knowing it had not been accidental that the commissioner had chosen a black trooper for the task.

Ed Chance went to the line of wooden horses that kept the newsmen out of the Common. "I'm going to meet El Fatah. I'll allow a pool group to come with me. Three reporters and two television cameramen. And I'll permit no interruptions when we're talking."

He turned on his heel, rejoined his subordinates, and nodded toward the center of the Common.

Trooper Joe Borden walked in the lead, holding up a nightstick to which was tied a large, white handkerchief. The commissioner came behind him, with Major Schneider and Lieutenant Martin falling in on his left. All four unconsciously marched in step, their pace brisk. Two cameramen raced toward the middle of the Common, followed by three reporters.

The five El Fatah members, all armed with pistols or shotguns, had already reached the spot they had selected for the conference. Their faces were expressionless as they watched the troopers approach and then halt.

For a moment no one moved, and then Ed Chance took a step forward. "Who is in charge?" he demanded.

A black man of medium height came forward, a shotgun cradled in his arm. "I am General Ibrahim," he said.

"It is my duty to inform you," the commissioner said, "that you are violating many laws. You're guilty of kidnapping, inciting to riot, conspiracy, intimidation, and, in all probability, treason. For your information, your leaders have been taken into custody. That may change the plans for your circus this afternoon."

"Our plans are not changed." The man who called himself Ibrahim remained impassive. "We took this possibility into our calculations, and we demand their release."

"Their freedom will be granted or denied under due process of law," Commissioner Chance replied.

"The El Fatah nation makes and observes its own laws. We recognize no others."

"Then you must accept the consequences of your violations." The commissioner's tone was curt. "I assume you've broken the peace of a holiday weekend for a purpose. What is it you want?"

The man dug into a pocket of his faded jeans and took out a small piece of lined paper, which he unfolded. "First," he said, "we demand the unconditional release of our council members. Second, we demand that all property in the city of Winthrop, public and private, be given to El Fatah. Third, all white residents of Winthrop will evacuate the city. These terms must be met no later

than sundown tonight. If they are, El Fatah will show mercy to the enemies of our nation who are being held in the churches, and will set them free. Otherwise, the prisoners will be executed."

The demands were so outrageous that Chance lost his composure. "Do you mean to tell me you would murder hundreds of men, women, and children who have done no harm to anyone?"

"Not murder," Ibrahim said. "Execute. We will administer El Fatah's justice to the enemies of our nation."

For the sake of the hostages, the commissioner was forced to temporize. "I don't own any property in Winthrop. I therefore don't have the right to accept your terms myself. I'll have to refer them to higher authority."

"That," said Ibrahim, "is why El Fatah has given you until sundown. Let us know when you are ready to surrender." He stalked off across the Common, his four followers behind him.

THE net around the El Fatah sector grew tighter as reinforcements from various local police departments arrived in Winthrop. Red Martin toured the perimeters and then wandered over to the state police chow wagon for coffee and a sandwich. As he took the food he heard someone call his name. Turning, he saw Captain Max MacGregor in civilian clothes sitting behind the wheel of a car.

Red went over, and as he climbed into the front seat beside Max he realized that a young black was sitting in the back.

"Lieutenant Martin," the captain said, "I don't know if you've ever met the most insubordinate rascal we've ever had on the force, Trooper Lindsay Northrup."

Red stared at the young man with greater interest and held out a hand. "So you're Northrup."

"Yes, sir," Lindsay said, and grinned.

"I spent ten minutes chewing him out," MacGregor said, "and the minute I stopped he had the nerve to throw a new idea at me."

"It seems to me," Lindsay said, "that I can find out a lot of things if I get through the lines and mosey around the churches. The only El Fatah people who know I'm a trooper are in our custody. I still have my El Fatah armband, and somebody must have my name on a list of their shock troops."

"How would you get through the line?" Red asked.

"Well, sir, Sergeant Donovan is in charge about a half block from here. I could hang around the barricades in his sector. Maybe you'd come along and talk to him and his troopers. All of a sudden I make a break and run through the lines. You yell at me to stop—"

"It would be important, obviously, for us to make a commotion big enough so the El Fatah sentries would see it," Red said.

"Exactly, sir!" Lindsay leaned forward, eagerness in every tense line of his body. "They know you're reluctant to shoot—and I get through. I produce my armband, I identify myself, and I even have a snub-nosed .38 automatic that happened to come into my possession this afternoon."

"What do you tell them about the others who left the El Fatah headquarters with you?"

"That's easy," Lindsay said. "I tell them the other guys were arrested, which they already know, and I say that I got away. Lieutenant, I can find out exactly how many hostages are being held and how they're being treated."

"Getting you into their camp is relatively simple," Red said, "but getting you out again might be impossible."

"He's figured that one, too," Max MacGregor said.

"We set a time," Lindsay said. "Five o'clock, six o'clock. At the agreed hour you create a diversion. A big one. Fireworks in the sky, a demand for another conference with El Fatah. And I make a break and come back, safe and sound."

"A hell of a plan," Red said, "if it works. Do you see any holes in it, Max?" he asked.

"So many that I'll have nightmares for the next year," the CID head declared.

ROUGHLY the same situation prevailed in all four of the churches that stood at the north end of the Common. The churchgoers trapped by El Fatah were being allowed to use the washrooms, parlors, meeting chambers, and Sunday-school quarters. Armed guards merely prevented the prisoners from leaving the buildings.

Lindsay Northrup, wearing his armband and wandering from church to church, made a thorough inspection. He found the pa-

rishioners maintaining their own order. Children had been sent to Sunday-school rooms, where teen-agers were helping to care for the younger ones. The clergymen circulated among their flocks, encouraging them with smiles and quiet words.

In the black church, the last of the four that Lindsay visited, the tension was far more noticeable, thanks to the brusque contempt of the guards for their captives. El Fatah regarded the black churchgoers as traitors who had sold out to the white establishment. Guards patrolled the vestibules and grounds in pairs, and only the interior of the church proper was peaceful. Elsewhere angry young men and women exchanged shouted insults with the guards, and both groups seemed to be waiting for a spark that would set off an explosion.

Glancing at his watch, Lindsay saw that he had another half hour before the diversion occurred that would allow him to make his break. Wandering from one room to another in the church annex, he felt someone staring at him, and his heart pounded when he saw Sunny Watson sitting in a corner with her mother and aunt. It had not occurred to him that Sunny might be one of the innocent victims. She looked so lovely he ached, and then he felt his temper soar because of the outrage that was being committed.

Sunny quickly averted her gaze, and when Mrs. Watson turned hastily away, Lindsay realized that she too must be aware of his situation. But Sunny's aunt, who had known him for twenty years, had been told nothing about his work as an undercover agent. "You there!" she called, her indignation overcoming her caution. "Aren't you Lindsay Northrup?"

Two El Fatah guards paused in the corridor outside the room.

Sunny tried to quiet her aunt, but she refused to be soothed. "What would your mama and papa say if they could see you now, Lindsay Northrup? You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Lindsay knew he had to silence her before she said too much. Taking the automatic from his belt, he crossed the room and stood above Sunny's aunt, glowering at her. "Lady," he said, brandishing the pistol, "shut your mouth or I'll have to shut it for you!"

Suddenly a well-dressed man in his early thirties leaped to his feet and stood between Lindsay and the women. "If you're looking

for a fight, I'll oblige you! Coward!" He drew back his right fist.

The two guards had moved into the room, and the twenty or more persons gathered there stiffened in anticipation of a tragedy. But at that instant Sunny jumped to her feet and, squeezing between the two antagonists, threw her arms around the man's neck.

The intimate gesture roused Lindsay's jealousy, even though he was grateful to Sunny for finding the one way to prevent violence. Conscious of the guards' presence, he spat on the floor at the couple's feet. Then, cursing fluently, he stalked out into the corridor, beckoning imperiously for the guards to follow him. "It wouldn't surprise me none," he said, "if these goody-goodies are tryin' to make us blow our cool. But not me! If they're too dumb to know El Fatah's day has come, let 'em dig their own grave!"

The guards agreed with enthusiasm.

Lindsay looked back into the room, and for an instant his eyes met Sunny's over the shoulder of the man she was still clinging to. He didn't know whether she was laughing or crying, but there was something in her expression that needed no interpretation. For him she had become, quite suddenly, the personification of his future, the reality for which he would take any risk.

GOVERNOR Trindle was surrounded by an escort of troopers as he walked toward the command post established by Commissioner Chance. The other members of his party included Major General Howard Wolff, commander of the Connecticut National Guard.

Commissioner Chance raised his hand in salute. "Good evening, sir. I've been expecting you."

"What's the situation?" Warren Trindle demanded.

"No change. They're standing pat, and so are we."

"What's being done to resolve this crisis?" The governor's tone was not pleasant.

"This is El Fatah's last gasp," the commissioner said. "The interrogation of their council is producing so much information they'll never be able to reorganize."

"I'm delighted, of course," Trindle said, "but that does nothing to help the hostages."

"Not directly," Ed Chance said, "but knowing we've broken their

back makes me all the more reluctant to see any fighting. They may behave sensibly when they realize their cause is hopeless."

General Wolff injected himself into the conversation. "Do you have the manpower for an assault on their lines?"

"Yes, but I don't want to give El Fatah the excuse to start slaughtering hostages."

"General Wolff believes we should put up a show of strength," Trindle said. "He believes we'll get immediate results if we throw a couple of National Guard regiments around your cordon, and then order El Fatah to surrender, making it clear that we're coming after them if they don't."

"Oh, that will bring results," Ed Chance said, "but they may not be what we're seeking. A bald threat like that could touch off the shooting of the people in the churches."

"I don't believe it would," Wolff said.

The commissioner shrugged. "Maybe not, but I prefer not to gamble with the lives of so many innocent people."

The governor drummed his fingers on the side of a communications van. "My God, Chance—you've got to do *something!*"

"We're hoping to get a report shortly from an undercover agent who is making a survey across the lines. The first major crisis will come at sundown, I believe, when El Fatah's military people find out we aren't giving in to their demands. If they start shooting hostages, we're prepared to rush in. But if they continue to procrastinate, which is what I hope, I'd rather wear them down."

Red Martin approached and saluted. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Commissioner, but we're staging our show in sixty seconds."

Ed Chance wasted no words. "Governor, I must ask you and General Wolff to move under the trees. For your own protection." The governor hesitated, then obeyed, followed by Wolff.

Red nodded toward his right, where Sergeant Donovan and two troopers were crawling across the Common. They halted, planted several sticks in the ground, and, lighting long matches, twisted around to watch Lieutenant Martin. Red was studying his watch, his free hand raised. "Now," he said, and his hand descended.

Mike Donovan touched the match to the end of his stick, and at five-second intervals the troopers followed his example. Suddenly

the first stick shot high into the air and exploded in a dazzling shower of colored lights. A second shower erupted, then a third, and almost everyone stared upward.

Commissioner Chance and Lieutenant Martin were peering intently at the far side of the Common. "There he is!" Red said. "He's coming!" A slender black man was racing across the Common.

Two rifle shots broke the silence, and the running man pitched forward on the ground.

"Did they get him?" The commissioner's voice was anguished.

The figure crawled forward rapidly, hugging the ground.

"He's okay," Red said in admiration. "They're aiming too high."

The commissioner picked up a bullhorn. "Hold your fire, men!"

As the crawling man approached the parked cars on the near side of the Common, he rose to his feet and raced between the cars, using them as a shield. Several troopers surrounded him and escorted him to the communications van, where Captain Max MacGregor was waiting. MacGregor enveloped the slender man in a bear hug before leading him into the van. The commissioner and Lieutenant Martin followed, with Governor Trindle and Wolff close behind.

The entire aft section of the van was an office on wheels. A conference table attached to a bulkhead was laden with field telephones, microphones, and other electronic equipment. The men who took up almost every available inch of space were sitting on small stools. There was so little room that the governor and the National Guard general could scarcely squeeze inside the entrance.

The commissioner and Lieutenant Martin wrung Lindsay's hand. Then Ed Chance said, "Governor Trindle, General Wolff, this is Trooper Northrup, who has just made a survey of conditions inside the El Fatah lines."

Lindsay summarized his findings.

"What I want to know," Warren Trindle said, "is whether those damn fools intend to make good their threat against the hostages."

"That's hard to say, sir," Lindsay declared. "Their officers are more responsible than I would have guessed, but the rank and file are capable of going berserk at any time. There's a real head of steam building up in the black church."

"Well, I congratulate you on your bravery, young man," Trindle said. "You may be sure we'll find a suitable reward for you when this crisis is ended."

"He has his reward," the commissioner said. "I've already sent for a uniform that'll fit him—with sergeant's stripes on the sleeves."

Lindsay murmured his thanks.

"Everything I've heard and seen," the governor said, "convinces me that I should intervene in this situation—personally. Your bullhorn gave me the idea, Chance. Provide me with an escort, and I'll go across to the El Fatah stronghold and try to persuade them to lay down their arms and give up their prisoners."

"That will move the ball off dead center," General Wolff said.

The troopers remained silent.

"Do you disapprove, Chance?" There was a hint of sarcasm in Trindle's voice.

"Not necessarily, sir. I'll provide you with an escort, naturally, but I don't see a speech doing much good."

"What does the sergeant think?" the governor asked.

Lindsay suddenly realized everyone was looking at him. "If you want an honest opinion, sir—"

"That's all I ever want," Trindle said.

"Okay. The men El Fatah has recruited for its strong-arm squads aren't bad, though I'm sure some of them have prison records. By and large, they're hard-core ghetto products. The grade-school dropouts, the unemployables. They're hopeless men who grasped a lifeline offered by men who pictured a whole new world for them. They'll do anything to get a better break in life. But the one thing they won't tolerate is empty political promises."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Trindle demanded.

"They've heard about all kinds of poverty programs from every candidate for every office. They've been given welfare handouts—and I'm not saying whether that's good or bad for them. They've broken the law because it seemed the only way to improve their situation. Now they're frightened—and cornered. If I were you, Governor, I wouldn't hand them pap. Start talking about a brighter tomorrow and they'll shoot you down."

Few subordinates had ever spoken to Warren Trindle with such

candor, but he did not take offense. "What approach would you advise me to take, Sergeant?"

Lindsay wondered how soon he would become accustomed to his new rank. "Damned if I know, sir," he said. "I'm a cop, not a statesman. All I can tell you is to level with them. And don't let them think for a minute that you're afraid of them."

"I'm much obliged to you, Sergeant. Commissioner Chance, if you'll provide me with the detail, I'll see if I can be half as persuasive as our young friend."

EMILY Martin was alone in the living room with her younger daughter. Myra's attitude, a mixture of contrition and hostility, indicated the inner confusion she was suffering. "If you don't mind, Mom, I'd rather not talk about the past few days," she said.

Emily was aware of her daughter's delicate balance, but at the same time she recognized her duty as a parent. "I can't say I've been looking forward to this chat myself," she said, "but some things can't be avoided. I'd like to hear about the festival."

"There's nothing to tell."

"But you and Margaret decided to leave early, so it couldn't have been that much fun." Emily's persistence was gentle.

"All right. So we were nearly raped, and a trooper, Annie Kirkland, managed to save us. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

It was an agony to preserve a calm façade, but Emily succeeded. "I'm grateful to Miss Kirkland, and I'm sure your father is."

Myra stared at her. "That's all you have to say?"

"It would be pointless for me to become hysterical. You behaved foolishly, and it appears you've been frightened. I just hope it taught you something, which is the most important part of growing up, and I'm relieved nothing worse happened to you."

"But it did. We smoked pot—more than once."

Emily knew Myra was seeking the relief from guilt that a severe scolding would give her. "If you've become an addict, I'm sorry for you, but you're a big girl now, and I don't intend to keep you locked in your room."

"People don't become addicted to marijuana," Myra said. "It isn't habit-forming. Anyway, I didn't like getting stoned on it."

A sense of relief flooded Emily, but her nod was casual.

"It'll make you happy to know I'm not going to use it again," Myra said. "But my reason has nothing to do with you. Or Daddy. It's my own decision, for myself."

"That's as it should be, since you're the one who'll have to pay the penalty if you smoke it. But there is something else to be considered." Emily sat upright, her manner became firm and her voice grew stronger. "We aren't an ordinary family."

"Don't I know it! My father is a cop, so I'm supposed to set an example for other kids. That's all I've ever heard!"

"I find it rather difficult to remember when I wasn't the wife of a policeman," Emily said, "and I can assure you it hasn't been easy for me, either. A woman married to a trooper must be above suspicion at all times. When we go to a restaurant, I've got to be a model of decorum. If my laugh is just one shade too loud, people will say that Lieutenant Martin's wife is drunk. I'm expected to solicit for every charity drive and join every committee in town. Because it's what's expected of a public servant's wife."

"I never thought about it from your angle," Myra muttered.

"Now you know," Emily said. "And since I've told you this much, I'll pass along one more nugget. The strains are so great that your father and I are seriously thinking about divorce."

Myra's face contorted. "You mustn't! What—"

"That's all I intend to say about it. This discussion is about you, Myra. Whether you like it or not, you're the daughter of a lieutenant of state police—and you owe it to your father to live up to the standards of his profession!"

Captain Daniels, Lieutenant Martin, and Sergeant Donovan acted as escorts for the governor when he crossed the Common to make his appeal to El Fatah. It was impossible to hold back the newsmen who straggled in their wake.

Warren Trindle walked to the far side of the Common, halting a scant ten yards from the automobiles that lined the curb in front of the four churches. El Fatah sentries carrying rifles took up places of vantage behind the cars. Red Martin had to admit that the governor was demonstrating remarkable courage.

"I'm Warren Trindle," the governor said, speaking into the bullhorn. "Most of you know me, and many of you voted for me. I've come to ask you to end your insurrection and set your hostages free. The members of your council are in federal custody, and will not be released. The federal government and the state of Connecticut will not be intimidated, nor will they bargain for the release of the citizens you are holding.

"I believe, however, that most of you—at present—are innocent of wrongdoing. Call a halt to this frightful charade, and most of you will not be punished. Those of your leaders who appear to be responsible for the kidnapping of innocent people will stand trial. The due process of law that is a keystone of the form of government most of our citizens hold dear—regardless of their color or faith—shall be observed. I have sworn to uphold the constitutions of our country and our state, and I shall honor those pledges. So I say to you, lay down your arms, set the hostages free, and let us strive together to build a nation that shows compassion to all, just as it grants freedom and justice to all."

Lowering the bullhorn, the governor handed it to Mike Donovan. Then, not waiting for El Fatah to reply, he turned on his heel and started back across the Common.

VII

MONDAY

TENSION mounted through the long, humid night. No shots had been fired at nightfall, which led the authorities to believe that El Fatah did not intend to carry out its threat against the hostages immediately. No one knew whether its leaders were beginning to vacillate, but as the night progressed it became increasingly evident that the authorities would have to take the initiative.

At 1:00 a.m. Governor Trindle went into conference with Commissioner Chance, the mayor of Winthrop, a member of the United States Senate, and two congressmen. The meeting ended at 3:30 a.m., and Governor Trindle disappeared into a police van. Some of the reporters speculated that he was calling the President, a fact later corroborated by a White House press secretary.

At 4:00 a.m. state police began to assemble on the Common, arriving in twos and threes as their places in the cordon surrounding the El Fatah enclave were taken by uniformed city policemen. Within a half hour more than five hundred troopers had gathered, and riot-duty equipment, including helmets, gas masks, and short carbines, was dispensed from closed trucks.

Governor Trindle and Commissioner Chance held a short press conference, and announced that a decision had been made to assault and overwhelm the El Fatah stronghold, with every effort being made to protect the hostages. The only additional information the commissioner released was that the assault vanguard would be led by Lieutenant Martin, and that his two wing commanders would be Sergeant Michael Donovan and Sergeant Lindsay Roosevelt Northrup.

At 5:00 a.m. the searchlights that had been set up around the Common were bathing the area in a bright light. A moment later a deep, rumbling sound filled the air. Two tanks lumbered into sight, rolled past the barricades, and took up positions on the side of the Common farthest from the El Fatah enclave. The searchlights played on the gun crews adjusting the elevation of their cannon, the show plainly visible to the insurrectionists.

Then six armored cars appeared and formed a line across the Common. While these vehicles maneuvered, Captain Daniels was driven onto the field in a jeep, which took its place in the center of the line. The mechanized strength of the state police was ready for action.

Several minutes later the vanguard of the state police infantry marched onto the Common, carbines at the ready. The fifty men, all wearing helmets and gas masks, formed a single line, with Martin in the lead, flanked by Donovan and Northrup. As they advanced, the armored cars moved forward behind them, and in the rear came the tanks, which halted in the center of the Common. All at once the main body of state police appeared and moved past the tanks. The lights picked up the glow of the eagles on the collar of Commissioner Chance, in command of the main body.

The vanguard halted about ten yards from the barrier of parked automobiles. The armored cars stopped, too, and Captain Daniels

stood in his jeep, clearly visible to the El Fatah men. He pulled his gas mask down, and picked up a bullhorn.

"The state of Connecticut," he said, "demands the release of all hostages and the surrender of all arms and persons to the state police. You will be given one minute to obey this order."

The strategy was now clear. It would be impossible to kill all the hostages in a single minute, and the troopers apparently intended to act swiftly at the end of that time to prevent a slaughter.

Suddenly several shots sounded from the El Fatah side of the barrier. Two troopers fell to the ground, Sergeant Donovan clutching his left shoulder, and a trooper behind him toppling backward onto the grass. The rest of the line held steady.

Lieutenant Martin raised his carbine. "Fire at will!" he called. The vanguard fired as one man, reloaded, and fired again as they went forward at a trot.

Howitzers in the armored cars began to fire canisters of gas, the 105-millimeter cannon laying down a barrage of foul-smelling yellow-green smoke as they moved forward. Then the heavier guns in the tanks roared, and at the same time the main body of troopers swept toward the barrier on the run.

The thick clouds of heavy smoke filled the area between the parked automobiles and the front entrances of the four churches. An exceptionally strong riot-control gas was being used to incapacitate the El Fatah defenders. No man could continue functioning after he had been engulfed in the suffocating clouds. Since the doors of the churches were closed, hopefully the hostages would not suffer any ill effects.

Lieutenant Martin and his vanguard left to other troopers the task of taking the choking El Fatah into custody. Making their way past the parked cars, they quickly reached the lawns of the churches, where a new danger confronted them. Snipers in the church towers were not touched by the low-lying gas. Flashes of fire came from openings high in the towers, but none of the advancing troopers was hit. The group split into four squads of twelve men each, and rushed the main doors of the churches.

Martin, who led one squad himself, was the first to pull open the heavy double doors of St. Martin's Episcopal Church, where the

largest group of hostages was held. At the moment the doors opened, a flare was set off as the signal to stop firing gas canisters.

Twenty to thirty El Fatah irregulars were milling around in the vestibule. Troopers snatched their weapons from them and lined them up against a wall. While the main body of police surrounded the churches and poured in through side entrances, Martin's men climbed the towers and forced the surrender of the snipers.

Meanwhile, Red Martin hurried down the aisle of the church to the pulpit, and removed his gas mask. "Your ordeal is ended," he said to the hostages, "but we ask you to stay where you are until we tell you it will be safe to leave. We're cleaning out the last pockets of resistance in the basement rooms, and we don't want anyone hit by a stray bullet. We also ask you not to go outdoors until the riot gas is dissipated."

The churchgoers cheered as he moved back to the main entrance, again pulling on his gas mask.

Commissioner Chance was directing the last of the operations as Lieutenant Martin joined the members of the high command on the lawn separating the Episcopalian and Congregational churches. A warm, brisk wind from the west was thinning the gas clouds, and most of the officers had removed their masks.

"How is it going?" Red asked Captain Daniels.

"We killed one of them and wounded two others in an exchange of fire in the black parish hall," Daniels said, "and we shot two who were looting the Catholic church. We're in control everywhere."

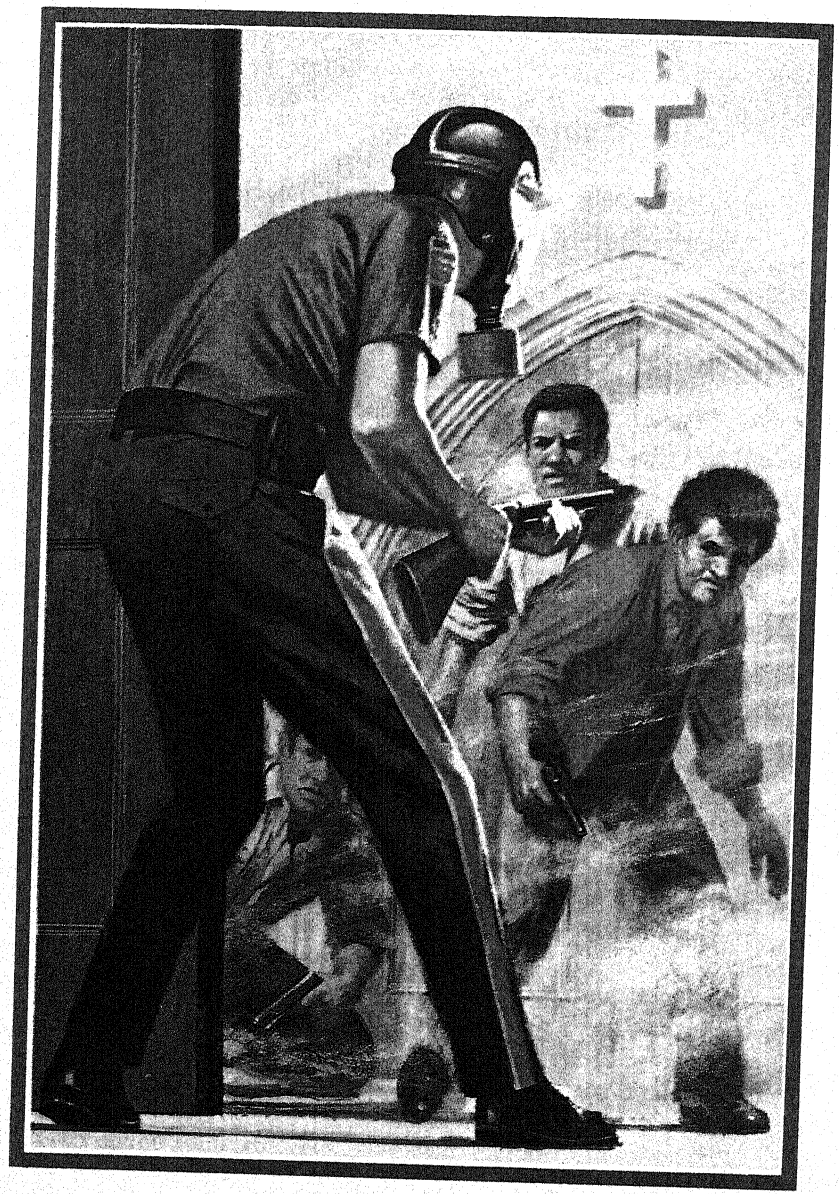
"Great. How badly were Donovan and Hazen injured?"

"Hazen has been taken off to the hospital, and I'm told he'll be okay. But I know nothing about Mike."

A grimy trooper behind them pulled off his gas mask, and they were startled to see an ashen-faced Mike Donovan, the left side of his shirt stained and stiffened with drying blood. "Nobody," he said, "was going to keep me out of this scrap!"

It was obvious he was in pain. Red summoned a nearby trooper. "Find a car, and see that Sergeant Donovan is taken to the hospital without delay."

The two wounded troopers had been the only state police casualties. Besides the losses reported by Captain Daniels, El Fatah



had suffered one killed and eight injured, two critically when they put up a last-ditch resistance in the steeple of the Congregational church. Scores of El Fatah men, still feeling the effects of the gas, sprawled on the ground, tears streaming from their eyes.

The commissioner directed that ambulances be driven to the church entrances to take hostages suffering from fatigue or illness to the hospital. Then, before most of the parishioners went to their homes, the clergymen held brief services of thanksgiving for their deliverance.

It was 7:00 a.m. when the first cars pulled away from the curb fronting on the Winthrop Common and the parking lots began to empty. El Fatah prisoners were being transported to the jail by truck, and sanitation workers were cleaning up the Common. The tanks and armored cars had gone, and soon Winthrop would be restored to normal. On the lawn between the Congregational and Episcopal churches, surrounded by more than two hundred reporters and photographers, Commissioner Chance and Governor Trindle, both unshaven and rumpled, held a press conference.

Rubbing the stubble on his chin, Red Martin started toward his cruiser, then stopped when he saw the newly promoted Sergeant Lindsay Northrup coming toward him. He was walking with one arm around the waist of a strikingly attractive girl.

"Sir," Lindsay called as they drew nearer, "do you know where Captain MacGregor is? Sunny and I want to ask him to be best man at our wedding."

BY LATE morning two judges of the Superior Court were holding emergency hearings in the state courthouse, dismissing those members of the El Fatah rank and file who had committed no overt misdeeds, and refusing bail to the organization's leaders.

Commissioner Chance received a detailed report by telephone on the emotional fever chart of every city and town of consequence in the state from Colonel Craven, who had remained in charge at Hartford headquarters. At the conclusion of the conversation, Chance rejoined his officers at the coffee bar. "I think," he said, "we can dismiss the possibility of race riots in other places. All of the big cities are quiet, the small towns are busy enjoying Labor

Day, and black leaders are condemning El Fatah in even stronger terms than the whites."

Major Schneider munched on a jelly doughnut. "You know," he said, "I damn near forgot this is Labor Day. Merrill Craven and I were going to play eighteen holes of golf this afternoon, but even if we go off duty, I'm not sure I could walk from the first hole to the second without falling on my face."

The commissioner helped himself to coffee. "If I weren't a bit on the tired side myself, I'd take on both of you. But I don't want anybody to count on emergency duty ending before tonight. How are things up at the festival, Red?"

"So far so good, boss," Lieutenant Martin said. "I just talked to our people there. They say the kids are going to clear out in the next few hours. Meantime I've beefed up the detail at Pine Lodge Lake again, and I intend to head up there myself. I want to be on hand when we start nabbing the pushers."

"That's a pleasure I don't intend to deny myself, either," the commissioner said. "Which reminds me—what's new on that threat of a motorcycle-gang war?"

"There hasn't been a stir anywhere," Art Daniels said.

Ed Chance sipped his coffee. "A false alarm, maybe?"

"I don't believe so," Art said. "Maybe Mayor Blasington at Chestnut cooled the kids down. His son was involved, you know."

The commissioner nodded. "If there are no more fireworks, we'll revert to the normal schedule at 6:00 p.m. Traffic will be a terrible headache, so we'll keep one-third of the roster on duty until midnight. Provided enough men are able to stay awake that long."

BY EARLY afternoon cars were lined up bumper to bumper in all six lanes on the turnpike, and the heavy traffic became the ally of the state police. Even in the express lanes it was impossible to drive faster than forty-five miles an hour.

At Pine Lodge Lake the weary troopers, who had not slept for close to thirty-six hours, managed to exchange banter with the young people who were leaving the festival.

Lieutenant Martin and Commissioner Chance sat in the former's cruiser near the main entrance. Their shortwave radio crackled

and sputtered as troop after troop received reports of minor traffic accidents. Suddenly Red hoisted himself a little higher in his seat. "Troopers Kirkland and Whitman are coming through the gate." He waved the two young women toward the cruiser.

"Well, our professional hippie detail," Ed Chance said. "How did you make out?"

"Sir," Annie replied, "it will take us at least two days to write a report."

"Then it was worth sending people in here?"

"We'll soon know," Gladys Whitman said, and waved in the direction of several other seeming civilians loitering by the state police cruisers parked near the gate. These were other undercover agents who had not yet emerged into the open. They and the troopers in the cars exchanged no signs of recognition.

"You don't look as though the experience disagreed with either of you," the commissioner said.

"I've been dreaming about a bath," Annie said.

The two officers laughed. Suddenly Annie broke off and went over to the sergeant who was directing the operation. Several troopers promptly surrounded a youth who was coming through the gates, and took him aside. They questioned him briefly, subjected him to a search, then handcuffed him and led him to a cruiser. The arrest was handled with such discretion that none of the people leaving the grounds realized what was happening.

Annie returned to the commissioner and Lieutenant Martin. "That one," she said, "is a pusher of LSD and meth. He had over four thousand dollars in cash in his pockets and knapsack."

Red Martin nodded approvingly. "Not bad."

"Do we have any really big operators on the hook?" Commissioner Chance wanted to know.

"Yes, sir," Annie said, and fell silent.

"There's one, at least," Gladys said quickly. "About as big a fish as we've ever hauled in for selling drugs. His name is Felipe Magador, and we were told in our briefing that he's a fairly high-ranking Cosa Nostra *capo*."

"Will he give us a hard time when we take him?" Red asked.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Annie said tersely.

"Our briefing indicated he was probably involved in the Sal Rumbino murder," Gladys explained.

"A nasty character." Red drummed on the steering wheel. "Do Sergeant Palmer and Sergeant Howard know what to expect?"

"Yes, sir," Gladys said. "They've worked out a system to clip his claws. Felipe is too good a shot to take any risks. Here he comes!" she added, and not wanting Magador to see her beside a police car, she opened the back door and climbed in.

Annie braced herself, then started toward the gate, a smile fixed on her face. Red Martin loosened his pistol in its holster. It was small wonder, he thought, that Annie Kirkland didn't care for the part she had to play; not even the most hardened trooper enjoyed identifying a criminal for purposes of making an arrest.

Felipe saw Annie and grinned.

"Hi," Annie said, a thickness in her throat making it difficult for her to speak.

"You're here," Felipe said. "I thought maybe you'd get tired of waiting and split."

"I told you I'd meet you here," she said. He was only a few feet from her now.

Three troopers had left their cruisers, and forming a semicircle behind Magador, began silently to close in.

"Felipe, listen to me." Annie spoke in a rush. "I want to tell you something. I—listen to me."

The troopers were no more than five yards from their quarry.

"I'm listening." Magador looked puzzled.

"Please," Annie said, "don't hate me—too much."

A sixth sense warned him of danger, and he glanced quickly over his shoulder, simultaneously reaching for his gun. Annie had anticipated the gesture, and catching hold of his wrist, clung to it with all of her strength. As Magador tried to free his arm the troopers pounced and bore him to the ground.

For a split second he remained motionless. Then he lashed out viciously, kicking one of the troopers in the groin, temporarily disabling him. He tried again to draw his gun, and when that effort failed he reached for his knife.

But the troopers were too quick for him. Within seconds his

right arm was twisted high behind his back, his left was pinned to his side, and his legs were held fast in an agonizing grip. Annie watched in horrified fascination.

"Cuff him," Sergeant Palmer directed. "Any more tricks," he told Magador, "and we'll have to truss you."

Felipe subsided, and the troopers led him behind one of the cruisers to search him. The first find was a quantity of heroin, packed in glassine bags, and some bags of marijuana. Several bundles of money fell from his knapsack and others came from each pocket. Carefully folded hundred-dollar bills were discovered inside a zippered belt compartment, and Magador's shoes disgorged still more.

The commissioner and Lieutenant Martin had joined their subordinates. "Sir," Sergeant Palmer said to Ed Chance, "this guy is a walking bank."

The trooper who counted the money handed the stacks to the sergeant for a recount. "If my arithmetic is right," he said, "I've added up $39,370."

The commissioner looked astounded. "Captain MacGregor will want to conduct a personal interrogation," he said. "So take the prisoner straight up to Hartford. Tell the captain to make certain they hold this man without bail when he's arraigned. If necessary, I'll appear before the court myself."

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Palmer said, and ordered Magador into a cruiser. Felipe paused first and looked at Annie. He did not speak, but for an instant his eyes blazed before he ducked his head and climbed into the car.

"Take Trooper Kirkland and Trooper Whitman home, please," the commissioner told another officer.

As the two vehicles disappeared from sight, the commissioner and Red Martin returned to the lieutenant's cruiser, where they sat for some moments in silence. "I've been married for more than thirty years," Ed Chance said at last, "and thanks to our type of work, I've met all kinds of women. Ladies. Whores. Saints. But the more I see of women, the less I understand them."

Red was reminded of his own domestic crisis, and his laugh was pained.

"Annie Kirkland did a great job this weekend, Red, and you'd think she'd be proud. But I could swear just now, when we were putting the clamps on Magador, there were tears in her eyes!"

THE exchanges Karl Roebish heard on his shortwave radio did nothing to improve his foul temper. Not only had the El Fatah confrontation in Winthrop produced state police heroes who would be rewarded by headquarters in Hartford, extolled by the press, and hailed by the public, but great things were happening at Pine Lodge Lake, too. It made him livid to think of the troopers who had subdued the notorious Felipe Magador in the presence of Commissioner Chance and Lieutenant Martin. Those fellows would be on every promotion list for years to come.

Anything, he thought, would be better than patrolling the major highways in traffic that could move only at a crawl. There were long backup lines at every toll station on the turnpike, and as the day wore on the congestion grew worse. His patience exhausted, Karl reached for his hand microphone, snapped it on, and asked permission to speak to the duty officer.

Sergeant Cohen, who had manned his desk for more than forty hours, sounded as though his mouth was filled with broken glass. "You got a problem?"

"Request permission to leave the idiot strip. Just for an hour, to make sure I haven't forgotten how to drive faster than thirty miles an hour."

Sergeant Cohen chuckled. "Where are you?"

"Approaching Exit 117A, eastbound."

"That'll take you out the other side of Chestnut Hills."

"Right."

"Fair enough. You might have a look-see at traffic on the new four-lane highway there." The shortage of manpower had made it impossible to patrol the new highway, and the rookie should have his hands full for the next hour or so writing tickets.

"Roger," Karl said, his spirits improving instantly. Swinging onto the new highway from a cloverleaf crossover, Karl noted immediately that, by comparison, there was no traffic of consequence here. He opened his window wide and stepped up his

speed to sixty-five miles per hour. The breeze revived him, and within moments he had work to do. In the next hour he handed out six tickets for speeding and a seventh for reckless driving.

Karl traveled north to the end of the new highway, then crossed the center strip and started south again. As his cruiser approached the junction of the lesser highway that provided a back-door access to Chestnut, he heard a sound resembling a Boeing 747 warming up on a takeoff strip. He turned off onto the two-lane asphalt road that curved through the Connecticut hills, and as the sound gradually became louder, Karl increased his speed.

Soon he caught sight of a procession on the road ahead. Lined up in columns of threes, as they crested the top of a hill, were seven rows of motorcyclists. All were dressed identically in unrelieved black leather, except for silver scarves around their throats and insignia of some sort on the backs of their heavy leather crash helmets.

Karl's pulse began to race as he wondered whether he had encountered one of the gangs that had been planning a rumble near Chestnut. Reaching for his microphone, he reported his suspicions to Troop R, giving the dispatcher his location.

There was a pause of only a second at headquarters before Karl received his instructions: "Stay on their tails and see where they lead you. Keep your line open, and feed us as you go."

"Roger." Karl stepped harder on the gas pedal. "They know they're being followed. They've increased their speed to seventy."

"Hang in there," the dispatcher said.

"I'm hanging." Karl took a sharp corner on two wheels. "We've left the highway, and we're moving southeast on a dirt road."

Again there was a pause; then another, more authoritative voice came on the air. "Is there a big red barn on your left, with a couple of storage silos behind it?"

"Yes, sir." The knowledge that Lieutenant Martin had returned to his headquarters gave Karl a feeling of greater security.

"Up ahead on your right there should be an old farmhouse. Gray, with the paint peeling off, and a broken-down porch."

"There it is!" Karl said. He saw the motorcycle squadron turning in behind the main building. "Looks unoccupied."

"Okay, we know where you are now. Stay alert!"

Karl slowed to a crawl as he reached the driveway where the cyclists were pulling to a stop, and froze for an instant when he looked beyond them. In an open field on the far side of a dilapidated barn another leather-clad group, wearing deep purple, were sitting astride their motorcycles.

Reporting his find, Karl tried to conceal his excitement.

"Can you handle them until we get some help to you?" The concern in Lieutenant Martin's voice was evident.

"I'll try, sir." Karl estimated there were about twenty in each gang, so he faced odds of approximately forty to one. The youths on both sides were armed with weapons ranging from spiked clubs and metal-studded whips to what looked like old .45 pistols and several hunting rifles.

"Hang in there," Red Martin said. Karl heard a general alarm being dispatched.

The black-uniformed motorcyclists were blocking the driveway. Karl drove onto the grass, and hurtled toward the waiting youths in purple. He headed straight at them, then swerved, pulled to a stop, and climbed out of the cruiser.

The boys, most of whom appeared to be in their late teens, were bewildered by the unexpected appearance of a trooper, and Karl decided to make the most of their confusion. Moving a few paces from his cruiser, he slowly examined each group in turn.

"I can think of better ways to spend a Labor Day afternoon, fellows," he said.

"Then go and do 'em!" one of the youths shouted.

Both sides cheered.

Conscious that his primary task was to stall until reinforcements arrived, Karl tried to give the appearance of only casual concern. "You boys in black," he said, "were guilty of reckless driving. All of you are carrying unauthorized weapons, and it won't be hard to place another half dozen charges against you."

The youths remained still, all of their hostility directed at the trooper. He could feel the menace. "Since this is the end of a long weekend," he said, "I might let you off. If you clear out right now. In twos and threes. And scatter in different directions."

Hoots and curses greeted this advice. Clearly their mood was becoming ugly.

"Which of you is young Blasington?" Karl asked.

There was a stir in the ranks of the purple-clad group, then a boy came forward. "My name is Blasington," he said, his manner sullen. "Want to make something of it?"

"Your father is the mayor of Chestnut."

"So what? If he told you to keep an eye on me, forget it. You can go to hell, and take my old man with you!"

His friends called out to him approvingly.

"Being the son of a mayor won't keep you out of a cell; you boys are all in this together. You'll be tried by a state court, where nobody has influence. You can reflect on that while you're serving your sentences."

"Who's going to arrest us? You?" young Blasington jeered.

Now Karl heard a sound for which he had been straining, the faint wail of a siren. "Boys," he said, "let's level with each other. You had some nice, cozy plans to bash each other's heads in this afternoon. You ask who'll put you under arrest. Nobody, if you behave yourselves and go home."

The sound of the siren was upon them as a cruiser turned into the driveway and headed across the field at breakneck speed. The cruiser thundered straight at the group of cyclists in black leather. As the youths scattered in panic, the car swerved. Then it jolted to a stop, and Trooper Richard Duncan emerged, pistol in hand.

"The first one who moves will get a bullet in the head," he shouted. "Line up, you punks, and don't get funny with me."

Karl became conscious of another approaching siren, and was relieved. He was sure that Duncan's rough tactics would boomerang eventually.

Another cruiser drove onto the field, and a weary Lindsay Northrup descended from it. He had been looking forward to spending the evening with Sunny, but he had heard the general alarm, so here he was. His new rank automatically placed him in charge. "What's the situation?" he called out, and Karl told him.

"Boys," said Lindsay, "throw your weapons down right over there—all of them. And Duncan, Roebish, I want you to frisk them

after they're disarmed. You'll then come to me, boys, one at a time, so I can take your names and addresses."

The members of both gangs obeyed meekly, and Lindsay proceeded with the task of taking their names. Then, after leaving the youths under Duncan's guard, he joined Karl, who was piling the last of the weapons into his cruiser.

"You did okay," Lindsay said. "As Lieutenant Martin intends to tell you when we bring the prisoners in for booking."

Karl was upset. "Is that necessary? I mean—I told them, sort of, that they'd get off free if they cooled their feud."

Lindsay shook his head. "That decision will have to be made by a Superior Court judge. Our job is to enforce the law, not make or interpret it. After we've shepherded them to Troop R and reported to Lieutenant Martin, he'll decide the charges—carrying concealed weapons, reckless driving, incitation to riot—whatever. We're responsible not only for stopping today's fight but for making sure these boys don't mix it up in the future."

"I guess I still have a lot to learn," Karl said.

"Sure," Lindsay told him, grinning, "but any trooper who won a showdown when the odds were forty to one against him doesn't have to worry about holding his job!"

THE soft haze of a September dusk settled over the land as the long holiday weekend drew to a close. Next morning a remarkable transformation would take place along the Connecticut shore. Thousands of clam bars, motels, and other small establishments would lock their doors and shutter their windows. The marinas would take on a deserted look. Already the traffic on the major roads was shrinking from its peak.

From her bedroom window Emily Martin saw a blue cruiser pull into the driveway, and slowly she made her way down the stairs. This was the moment she had been dreading all weekend, but it had to be faced. Hearing voices in the living room, she headed toward it. Billie was sitting with Trooper Roebish on the sofa, and the young man rose as Emily came into the room.

"Oh, dear," she said. "I thought you were my husband when I saw your cruiser."

"Karl has dropped in on his way home," Billie said. "We were going out tonight, but he's too tired."

"I guess Billie's right," Karl said. "I feel like I've been slugged."

"I heard on the radio that you did wonders breaking up those motorcycle hoodlums," Emily said. "Congratulations."

Karl, too flustered to reply, looked embarrassed.

He might know when her husband intended to come home, but Emily didn't think it would be appropriate to ask him. "You might give the young man something to eat, Billie," she said. "Before he goes home." Smiling slightly, she inclined her head in Karl's direction and retreated to the stairs.

Neither spoke again until she had gone. "I'm not sure," Karl said at last, "whether your mother was being hospitable or hinting that I ought to get out of here."

Billie laughed. "A little of both, I think. Could I make you a sandwich?"

"No, thanks. I grabbed some food at the barracks while we were doing the paper work on the kids." He yawned. "Maybe we can go out for dinner tomorrow night—if we can find a place in the area that's still open. Otherwise we can drive to Winthrop."

"It doesn't matter where we go," Billie said.

He agreed, but his thoughts returned to the obstacles still to be overcome. "What I can't figure is whether your mother still has no use for me, or whether she's softening."

"I'm not certain, either," Billie admitted. "I suggest we take each day as it comes."

"Sure," Karl said. "We have a lot of days ahead of us."

ANNIE Kirkland was too tired and dispirited to eat when she came home. She retired without delay to her own bedroom, and Pat, for once sensing her mood, left her alone. Annie spent a long time soaking in a hot tub, then washed her hair under the shower, and became so drowsy while drying it that she went to bed, where the deep mattress and soft pillow lulled her almost instantly to sleep.

When she awakened at dusk, the face that returned her stare in the mirror looked so woebegone that she felt driven to do some-

thing about it. Even though she was going nowhere, she spent some time making up, and brushed her hair into an attractive style. Then, suddenly ravenous, she went to the kitchen in search of something to eat.

Half of a cold meat loaf caught her eye, and she looked no further. She sliced a tomato, toasted some bread, and made a huge mug of iced tea. She was starting to eat when her sister walked in.

"I went next door for a little chat with Helen Blackman while you were asleep," Pat said. "Her son went up to that awful festival, and he told his mother he saw someone who looked remarkably like you. Why didn't you tell me where you were going?"

"When I'm ordered not to talk, I keep quiet."

Her sister, preparing herself a cup of coffee, assumed a martyred expression. "It's obvious you had a good time. Are you going out again this evening?"

"Hardly. I'm going straight back to bed after I've eaten. I'm due at eight in the morning in a juvenile runaway hearing."

"I thought all that fresh paint on your face meant you were going somewhere."

Annie shook her head. "I like it, that's all."

The brazen admission silenced her sister for only a moment. "I do hope you'll let your hair go back to its natural color."

Annie hadn't thought about her hair, but now she said, "I like being a blonde. I'm going to keep it this way."

"Nature made you a brunette."

"Nature didn't intend me to live out my life as a widow."

Pat caught her breath. "Annie!"

"What's wrong with that?" Annie's manner became fierce. "You'd be surprised if you knew the men who've found me attractive!"

"I've never heard you talk like this!"

"There's a first time for everything." Unwilling to continue the discussion, Annie jumped to her feet and ran to her bedroom.

"Captain Daniels," Art said into his telephone.

"This is Mayor Blasington of Chestnut, Captain," said the deep voice at the other end.

A grim smile crossed Art's face. "I've been expecting your call,

Your Honor. I've had a number of calls from various leaders of both houses of the legislature in the past hour. On your behalf."

"I hope you've given consideration to their requests, Captain," Mayor Blasington said. "Not that I'm asking very much. You know how it is with youngsters. They play boyish pranks."

"I know how it is," Art said. "Your son and forty-three others have been booked at Troop R headquarters, and will appear at a special hearing Friday morning in Superior Court."

"That's why I'm calling." Mayor Blasington paused, then spoke in a confidential tone. "I'll appreciate it, Captain, if you'll remove my son's name from that list. With forty-three others already charged, my son won't be missed."

"What you've referred to as a boyish prank, Your Honor," Art said, "is a matter the state police regard with the greatest concern. Not only was your son carrying concealed weapons, but he and the other members of the gang were prevented from engaging in combat by a trooper who intervened just in time. In fact, your son was one of those who defied the trooper and subsided only when other state police arrived on the scene."

"I've already talked to my boy, believe me, and I have every intention of punishing him."

"What you do is your business, but it can't be allowed to take the place of the state's business, Mayor Blasington," Art said.

"Are you refusing to help me, Captain?"

"I am, sir. The state police don't fix charges for anyone."

"I don't want to become unpleasant, Captain," Mayor Blasington said, "but if you won't cooperate, you'll force me to get in touch with Governor Trindle."

"That's your prerogative, Mr. Mayor. But there's nothing the governor or anyone can do that will cause us to drop the charges against your son. If he's innocent, he will have the same chance as the others to establish his innocence in open court."

Mayor Blasington muttered something and abruptly rang off.

Art stared at the telephone, shaking his head. Then he ran a tired hand across his face, glanced up at the clock, and dialed his home. "Bea," he said, "remember me? Put the martinis in the freezer and the steaks on the fire. The old man is coming home."

When Red Martin pulled into his driveway he found his daughters sitting on the side porch. Both came to him as he approached, and his heart was heavy as he wondered whether this was the last night they would live as a family under one roof.

"I've been waiting for you to get here so you can rip into me," Myra said.

"You don't look any the worse for the festival," Red said, holding her at arm's length and studying her.

"If I'm not it's because of Annie Kirkland. She—"

"Later," Red said. "You've waited this long, so I'm sure you can hold off a little longer." He turned to his older daughter. "How's your world, Billie?"

She greeted him with a kiss. "Isn't it wonderful about Karl?"

"I've had enough of Karl's wonders for one day. Booking those boys took me two hours." He saw her crestfallen expression and laughed. "Roebish did a first-rate job, Billie. I'm proud of him."

The girl's face came alive again.

Red braced himself. "Is your mother around?"

"She's inside," Billie said.

He went into the house, and was surprised to see Emily sitting in the living room holding a book. "Hi," he said.

"It's been a long weekend." Emily betrayed no emotion. "You must be tired."

"Well, I don't have as much zip as I did when I was a kid, that's for sure."

"You must be hungry," Emily said, rising to her feet.

"Not really. I had a sandwich at the barracks."

"I hope you have enough appetite for stuffed cabbage."

At least she thought enough of him to have prepared one of his favorite dishes, and it was easy to smile his thanks. "Have you ever known me not to eat it?"

"I'll fix you a drink while you change," she said, and started out of the room.

"A slug of bourbon would knock me flat on my face, so I won't bother to change," he said, following her into the kitchen.

Emily busied herself at the stove, and was silent. Red washed his hands at the sink, then began to rummage in a cupboard.

"What are you looking for?"

"That jug of apple cider you bought. Have the kids finished it?"

"I haven't allowed them to touch it. I knew you'd want some, so I put it in the refrigerator."

He poured the cider into two glasses, and carried them to the kitchen table. Emily filled his plate and joined him.

"I don't suppose," Emily said, "that you'll be getting any extra time off this coming weekend."

This was it, he thought. "Not a chance. There will be too much reorganizing and too much paper work after this busy a time."

"That's what I thought," Emily said. "So I called my parents up at the Cape, and told them they'll have to come down here to see us. I tried not to hurt their feelings, but I made it plain that I won't go up there without you."

For a moment Red was numb. Then the impact of her words struck him with such force that he did not trust himself to speak. He reached across the table and covered her hand with his.

Emily raised her glass of apple cider. "It won't be easy," she said, "for either of us."

Red returned the toast. "Anything worth having and keeping," he said, "is worth earning the hard way."



W. A. SONNTAG

A Salute to the Troopers

by Noel B. Gerson

This story began on a snowy morning in early 1970. My biographical novel *T.R.** had just been published, and I was on my way to Hartford to be interviewed about the book on radio and TV. With me in the car were my wife, Marilyn, and our three youngest children; the youngsters had never visited a broadcasting studio, and we were making it a family outing.

We had covered about half the fifty-mile journey from our home

**Condensed Books, Volume 1, 1970.*

on the Connecticut shore when my car suddenly and inexplicably died, refusing to budge. The crew of a highway department truck helped me push it onto the shoulder of the road and gave me a lift into the nearest town, while Marilyn and the children stayed behind in the car.

By sheer good fortune I spotted a Connecticut state trooper parked near the public telephone, and he went into action as soon as I explained my problem. He commandeered a taxi to take me into Hartford, then went back to rescue my stranded family.

Two hours later, the interviews over, I called the state police, hoping for some information about my wife. In less than five minutes they called back, having traced her to a repair garage in Middletown, where she had been towed. They told me what was wrong with my car, and said that my wife would be calling me momentarily. She did, and an hour later we were reunited.

Grateful for the help we had received, I wrote a letter of thanks to the commanding officer of Troop F, in whose area our troubles had taken place. Next day the lieutenant was on the telephone, inviting me to the barracks for lunch. I accepted, and learned that the invitation had been prompted by the "extraordinary" fact that I had felt impelled to express my thanks to the state police. Complaints rained on troop commanders, but gestures of appreciation were rare.

Before I left Troop F headquarters that day, I had conceived the germ of the idea that has grown into this book. The state police commissioner allowed me to make an in-depth study of his organization, opening doors and files to me and instructing his entire force to cooperate with me in every way. Since then I've made more than one hundred trips into the field with officers and men of the state police. I've gone step by step with them on riot calls, and investigations of murders, robberies, and other crimes. I've seen undercover agents on duty. I've been on patrol with troopers, and seen them write more tickets and warnings than I could count.

Above all, it has been my privilege to know scores of men of every rank, and to have formed several enduring friendships. In an era when the police forces of many Western nations are being subjected to unprecedented criticism and abuse, I have learned a great deal about the "new breed" of law-enforcement officer and why he pursues his difficult vocation. It is my hope that the reader will join me in a salute to these men.

An adoptee's twenty-year quest to unlock the secret of her identity

A condensation of the book by

Florence Fisher

ILLUSTRATED BY SAUL LAMBERT



When Florence Ladden was a little girl, she happened to see a document bearing the name Anna Fisher and the word "adopted." In spite of her mother's vehement denials, Florence suspected that she herself was Anna Fisher—an adopted child—and she longed to know about her real parents. When at last she began to search for them, she found herself blocked at every turn. Adoption files were sealed; information was permanently classified. But the difficulties only strengthened Florence's determination as she followed every clue that could bring her closer to those two shadowy figures, her natural mother and father.

This true story of a remarkable twenty-year search has all the suspense of a good detective novel. Yet at its heart lies a very provocative question: how much is an adopted child entitled to know about his natural origins?

Prologue

FOUR years ago I was in an automobile accident. The brakes failed, and I pressed the pedal frantically. I swerved, to avoid another car directly ahead, and a telephone pole raced toward me. My last thought in the second before the crash was: Oh, God, I'm going to die and I don't know who I am.

As I lay in the sterile white outpatient room, with three broken ribs, glad to be alive but still terrified at the thought of what might have happened, a nurse came in to ask the routine questions. "Are there any hereditary diseases in your family?"

How could I answer her? I was an adoptee.

Perhaps it was that brush with death and the thought that I might die still not knowing. But even though I was forty and the mother of a grown son, I knew I had to continue the search for my natural parents that had begun twenty years earlier.

What is more natural than the desire to learn something of one's heritage? All children love to hear anecdotes about their parents and grandparents. They look at their parents and try to find something of themselves in the way these people walk and talk, in their interests and talents, in their strengths and flaws. These things provide a continuity with one's past.

A great mythological king once said: "My mind abideth strong/ To know the roots that grew to Oedipus." My lonely search was for the same hidden roots.

Everything in this book is true and happened exactly as written. However, to ensure privacy, most of the names have been changed.

NOT LONG AGO I flew to California to meet a man I had never seen. The man was eighteen years older than I, and during the two weeks we spent together he was frequently taken for my escort. We went to a Polynesian restaurant the first night and sat looking at each other for hours. He told me of the stunt work he did, the movies he'd worked on, the actors and actresses he knew.

"Bring my daughter the menu," he said to the waiter. "Let's see what my daughter wants." It seemed he couldn't say the word often enough.

I couldn't believe I'd found him. I felt so proud of this warm, laughing, absolutely delightful man. And I felt I'd earned him.

"You're far away," he said once, sensitive to my slightest mood. "Where were you?"

"I was thinking of the past," I said. All evening I had felt the past, the present, and the future slamming together inside me.

"I know about your past," he said, and he told me everything I wanted to know—openly, fully, with only a touch of regret.

The next day he took me to his studio. "This is my daughter," he told a friend. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"I didn't know you had a daughter, Fred."

"Of course I have a daughter! I've always had a daughter."

He introduced me to the studio gateman, to his barber, to people at a luncheonette. I'd brought him a picture of me taken when I was three years old, and several times he displayed it proudly. "Let's get out of here before they lock you up," I whispered gaily. "You're totally nuts!"

He took photographs of me from many angles. Look up. Look down. Turn your face this way, Florence. He was like a father with his little girl, and I loved being that little girl. We went to the Farmers Market, and walked through the stalls of vegetables, fruits, and exotic foods. When he had to leave for a job interview, he said: "Have to take you back now."

"I'll stay here," I said. "You can pick me up later."

"What do you mean, you'll stay here? *Alone?*" He wasn't at all sure it would work. "You won't talk to strangers, will you?"

"Look at me," I said, laughing. "I'm not two years old."

The day I had to leave, we were quiet and depressed. Driving

to the airport, he'd look intently into my eyes and say: "My kid!" From the window of the plane that would take me back to New York, where I had a husband to love and an organization to run, I looked out and saw him standing there quietly, his eyes seeking my window. He blew me a kiss and waved. I waved back and whispered, not good-by but *ciao.*

Finding my natural father more than justified the search that had occupied almost my whole life. It was a search that really began with a piece of paper I found when I was seven years old.



Part One: *Who Is Anna Fisher?*

1

My name was Florence Ladden. I was always a very small girl, so small my parents made me sleep in a crib, bars up, until I was ten. But I loved to sing and dance, and I made up for my size with the noise I made and the mischief I got into. From my earliest years I felt there was a mystery surrounding my life.

I lived with my mother and father, Rose and Harry Ladden, in three rooms on the second floor of an apartment building in Brooklyn. There was a small square foyer as you came in, and a large closet to the right. On the shelf in this closet I kept all my prized Big Little Books. Though I can't remember who taught me, I was reading easily before I was five.

We had a kitchen, in which we ate; a living room, in which my

grandmother and my uncle Abe slept; and a bedroom, with a large double bed and my crib. My old grandmother, in her heavy-knit maroon shawl, was a rather grim presence in the apartment. But Uncle Abe, who took me for walks and let me help tend his homing pigeons, who smiled and saved silver Camel cigarette wrappers for me, was the joy of my life.

The first hint I had that some secret surrounded my birth came when I was five, the day my mother enrolled me in kindergarten. I remember how she combed out my hair that morning and fastened a bright taffeta bow on one side. I wore a pink dress and my Mary Janes.

We walked the few blocks to the red brick school building. I was terribly excited about going to school, where I knew I'd meet some friends and read a lot and draw.

"May we have Florence's birth certificate, Mrs. Ladden?" the registrar said. She was a dour, businesslike woman.

My mother put a hand in her purse, and then drew it back, holding the purse tightly as if trying to hide it. She turned to me. "Wait outside the door, Florence."

Why should she want me to leave the room? I knew what "birth" meant. I looked into my mother's yellow-green eyes. She was trying to hide something from me. She was *afraid.*

"I want to see it," I said, not moving from the registrar's desk.

My mother was growing angry. "Just wait outside," she said.

"Why can't I see my birth what-a-you-call-it?" I asked. When the registrar said something about my lack of discipline, my mother put her purse on the desk, took me by the arms, and led me out the door. She placed me forcibly on a bench in the hallway, and told me to stay there. She went quickly back into the room.

I sat there looking at the closed door. I'd never seen her eyes like that before. What was my mother saying about me in that room? Was something wrong with me? I began to squirm on the bench. After a few minutes, I got up and ran out of the building.

Half a block from our apartment building was a row of frame houses. One had a wooden porch, and I wriggled under it, crouching behind a pillar in the darkness. I didn't want to be found, not ever. I kept thinking of that strange look in my mother's eyes.

There was dirt everywhere, and soon my dress was smudged in a dozen places. My taffeta bow fell off, and I hunted for it in the dirt. I looked down at my Mary Janes; they were filthy.

I must have been there for hours, for when I saw the policeman's blue hat and then heard him say: "C'mon, little girl," it was already late afternoon and I was hungry.

When I was delivered home, I found my mother in hysterics. My father was home early from work, and without a word he hauled me into the bedroom and took off his belt. He never beat me when Uncle Abe was home, but now he had me alone and I was soon cowering under his blows.

As I think back on those early days I remember the tense atmosphere that reigned in our house. I learned later that the Laddens' marriage had been unhappy before I became a part of the family. The addition of a child was supposed to make things better, but it didn't.

The mystery was always there. I kept wondering what was *wrong*, why my father seemed so cold to me, why—unlike other fathers I saw—he never wanted to hold my hand. When you're a child, you have only one source for your answers: your parents. I *wanted* to believe them—and to understand.

A child misses little.

I CAN remember very clearly the day I found the paper. I was seven, and I had been playing by myself, as I usually did, sketching and cutting out paper dolls beside my crib in the bedroom.

Mother had been sneezing all afternoon, and I wasn't surprised when she called from the kitchen: "Florence, would you bring me a handkerchief? They're in the middle drawer of the dresser."

I yanked at the middle drawer. It came halfway out and then stuck. Still thinking of my cutouts, I reached in blindly. I remember the sweet smell of Mother's sachet—and then I heard a crinkling sound and felt a stiff piece of paper.

Quickly I pulled it out. It was black, with white writing on it. I'd never seen a photostat before and it frightened me. I could read very well by now, and I saw my parents' names, Rose and Harry Ladden. I saw a strange name, Anna Fisher. And I saw the

word "adopted." I knew that word. It meant you were someone else's child.

My name was Florence Ladden. Who was Anna Fisher?

I headed for the kitchen. My mother was standing beside the refrigerator in her pink print housedress and an apron. Her gray-white hair was pulled back flat on her head in a meticulous bun.

I held out the paper. "Who's Anna Fisher, Mommy?" I asked.

She looked startled, frightened. Her soft pink skin flushed, her eyes grew wide. She tore the paper out of my hand so roughly that a piece ripped off, and thrust it behind her back. I couldn't understand why she was so angry. "Am *I* Anna Fisher?" I asked.

"No, no," she said quickly now. "No, there's . . . well, there's another Rose and Harry Ladden in the family. Yes. They adopted a little girl . . . and . . . we're holding this paper for them."

I wanted to believe her. But she had grown extremely agitated, and her eyes and her voice said that something was terribly wrong. Finally I could hold back no longer. I shouted: "You're a liar!"

I remember how she started back, the tense twitching in her face. "You're calling your mother a liar?" she said, her voice rising. She stepped forward and slapped me sharply on the face.

My cheek stung, but now I couldn't stop. "It's a lie!" I shouted, fighting back my tears. "I'm Anna Fisher, I *know* I'm Anna Fisher."

For years after I found the paper, I'd wait for those times when my mother and grandmother left me alone in the apartment. As soon as the door closed, I'd start to search—through all my father's private papers, through every inch of the dresser, through all my mother's clothes.

Anna Fisher. The name would not leave my mind. I wrote it out on scraps of paper; I whispered it to myself. Had that paper really existed? I opened the seams of the upholstered furniture, and carefully sewed them up again. I actually looked under the linoleum that covered our floors instead of carpeting. My parents must have seen the scars of my search. But no one said a word.

There was only one person who I knew would tell me about that name. Uncle Abe. But I couldn't ask him.

I loved that man with all I was. He was my mother's brother and lived with us, on and off, during the years we were in New

York. Sometimes he'd be gone for several months, without a word, and I'd stand near the closet by the front door, pretending to put my Big Little Books in order but really listening for the elevator that would bring him to our floor.

Mother and I sometimes went to Manhattan, and she would drop me off at the garment factory where Uncle Abe worked, while she shopped or visited a friend. I'd sit for hours, fascinated, watching his fingers fly. Then we'd go outside, holding hands, and he'd buy me one of the delicious hot sweet potatoes that were sold from little carts throughout the garment district.

When Uncle Abe vanished for too long a time, Mother and I would go to the Lower East Side and climb floor after floor of old tenements to look for him at one of his pigeon roosts. He and his friends kept scores of pigeons in wire coops on the roofs, and would often send the birds shuttling back and forth with messages.

I'd suddenly see him standing beside a coop, with that straight black hair and those dancing blue eyes, and I'd run up and kiss his sunburned cheeks. I loved to see the broad smile spread across his face. He was always so happy to see me!

Often he took me for long evening walks, and we'd sit together on a stone bench. If he took me to a bar, I'd sit on his knees, try the sour beer, then spit it out, and we'd both laugh.

Once, when I had whooping cough, my birthday party had to be called off. Uncle Abe never missed my birthdays, and I'd been upset when he hadn't appeared the night before. But when I awoke in the morning, he was standing beside my crib. Without a word, he lifted me up over the bars and carried me to the refrigerator. Inside was the most enormous birthday cake I'd ever seen. It was white with pale blue topping, and it had three dark red roses and the words "Happy Birthday, Florence."

I never asked Uncle Abe about the strange paper I'd found, or about the incident concerning my birth certificate. Maybe it was because I was afraid he'd tell me the truth.

Two houses away lived an enormous family of southern Italians. There were three or four generations of them, and relatives were always coming and going. They'd sit around the huge kitchen

table—the old ladies wearing black stockings; the young man, Frank, playing the violin or singing; a raft of kids racing back and forth; the marvelous old grandfather they called simply Nonno.

They delighted and fascinated me, and I'd visit them whenever I could. Frank saw my interest in music and began giving me violin lessons. I already knew that music would play an important role in my life, but there was another reason why I took so readily to the violin. Though he was about twenty-five and I was not yet ten, I was madly in love with Frank.

There was always music in this household. Either Caruso sang from the phonograph while we all listened, or we sang arias ourselves from a dozen different operas—in Italian. Nonno would often take me on his lap and let me operate the player piano. We ate mountains of spaghetti and then sang some more.

With these Italians I could breathe; my blood was awake. They were always happy, full of exuberance and laughter. What a handsome family they were. And every ear, nose, and profile were exactly the same!

I would go back to our apartment and look at my mother and grandmother, and even at Uncle Abe. I looked like none of them. My hair was auburn, my ears had a certain curve, my nose a certain shape; my mouth was large, my cheekbones were high. I looked at those around me and found no similarity.

Sometimes, at my mother's vanity table, I'd take out boxes of family photographs and go through them—looking at cousins and uncles and aunts, old grandparents in foreign clothes, young nieces and nephews. When I arranged the three mirrors properly, I could look at myself—and the pictures—from all angles at once.

At least *one* person in my mother's or father's family *had* to look like me. I could see their similarities to each other. Someplace there must be a nose, a cheek, or eyes or ears like mine.

Yes, this man's nose, I'd think excitedly—and then I'd block off the rest of the face and look only at the nose, in the three mirrors, from all angles. Or the mouth. Or the eyes. Sometimes, desperate, I'd think: Yes, I do look like him. I do. I do.

But the next time I looked the resemblance had vanished. It was such a small thing. Why did it hurt so much?

NOW, WHEN THE WHOLE drama is done, I think back on all the misery it must have caused my mother to maintain a lie that finally became a mania. It strained her love for me and mine for her. She became possessive beyond belief, terrified to the point of sickness that her secret would slip out. It is hard to explain. Certainly there was far more of a stigma attached to adoption in those days. And if I was illegitimate, or they thought so, this Orthodox Jewish couple might have wanted to protect me.

When I became close to another girl in the building, my mother would tell me sharply: "I don't like that little girl and I don't want you to play with her."

I would insist that the girl was my friend.

"You love your friend more than you love your mother," she would say, her voice taking on an edge of tension and hysteria.

"I *will* play with her," I told my mother once.

Time cannot dull the memory of what happened next. I can still hear her saying: "I'm going to kill myself." She marched into the bathroom and reappeared with my father's straight razor. "I'm going to kill myself," she repeated.

"She's my friend," I said, my voice much lower now. "I have a right to play with her."

My mother turned back into the bathroom and locked herself inside. Her voice came through the door, high and thin. "When you see the blood, Florence, you'll know you've killed your mother. Do you understand?"

I pounded on the door. "Please don't kill yourself!" I screamed. I can still see myself lying down and looking at the slit of light below the door. "I'll be good," I cried. "I won't play with anyone. Don't kill yourself. Please. I'll only love you. I promise, Mommy."

There was no sound. One . . . two . . . five minutes. "Mommy?" I said in a low voice.

Then I heard the lock snap back. I didn't know what I'd see, and I feared the worst. When she came out, I ran to her and said, over and over: "I don't love anyone but you." That sort of thing happened a dozen times in my childhood.

After we had argued or fought, when we were both quiet, my mother would sometimes take out one or two items of jewelry from

her top drawer for me to look at or play with. During the depths of the Depression she pawned them. I remember the trips she made to the pawnshop to put down a payment. "I don't want to lose any of it," she'd say, "because someday it will all be yours."

She had an engagement ring of diamonds and sapphires which I loved. My mother used to wind a string around my finger, then put the ring on over it, and let me wear it for an afternoon. "When you're old enough," she told me, "we'll have this made smaller for you and you can always wear it."

There was no privacy in the apartment; I wasn't even permitted to lock the bathroom door. When my mother caught me locking the door, she'd threaten loudly until I came out. I can only think that her concern was sexual, for once, when my father came into the kitchen in his underwear, my mother insisted I was staring at him and called me a little tramp. Other mothers never acted like this. Did it have anything to do with that strange name I'd seen on the piece of paper?

Over the years that lie, that secret, whatever it was, took its sad toll on us all. At night, lying in my crib with the bars up, I often had terrifying dreams. One came back time after time. I had killed somebody. I had buried the body under a tree and was desperately afraid I'd be found out. In the darkness I would see a shovel, the fresh dirt, the same shadowy tree, and I would wake up shaking, my forehead wet, my hands icy.

But then I would look over to the big bed where my mother and father were both sleeping silently. Only when I was an adult and made the connection between the dream and my mother's saying that I was killing her did the dream stop.

During those increasingly rare moments when my mother and I could talk calmly to each other, she would tell me how she'd always wanted a child and how difficult her pregnancy had been. "When I went to St. Anthony's Hospital, the labor pains were simply awful. I had *such* a hard time when I had you, Florence," she'd say.

I wanted to believe her. If she had had labor pains, if she had delivered me at St. Anthony's Hospital, she *must* be my mother.

Then who was Anna Fisher?

2

WHEN I was ten, we moved to Philadelphia. There had been much hushed talk about the move, my mother insisting it was impossible, that in no circumstances would she go to that city. My father went to Philadelphia a full year before we finally pulled up roots in Brooklyn. He came home every second or third weekend, and I wasn't sorry to see so little of him. My grandmother stayed in New York, for which I was grateful, but Uncle Abe remained there too, and I could hardly bear not having him near me.

The mystery I had lived with as a child was compounded in my adolescence. A child senses that something is wrong, but knows that he must live with it. An adolescent rebels.

In our new apartment I had a room of my own and—at last!—that hated crib was out of my life forever. How my friends in Brooklyn had made fun of it, and of the fact that I had been given milk from a bottle until I was seven, when I finally threw it out the window. But in place of the crib I now had a junior bed, in which I slept until I was seventeen; its sides, my mother kept reminding me, would stop me from falling out. My new friends found a junior bed ridiculous, and were shocked that my mother didn't permit me to keep my bedroom door closed. The bed was soon one of the most hateful objects in my life. Over a period of two years, I broke the slats of the sides one by one.

How different it was at my friends' houses. Irene did not have to account to her mother for every minute of her time, but I couldn't leave our apartment without getting the third degree when I came back: "Where were you?" "Who were you with?" And my mother read all my letters—those I wrote and those I received. She seemed desperate to protect me from any harm—from the world and from myself. The last, the lack of trust, hurt most.

Once, when we went back to New York for a visit, I was invited to an all-girl overnight party. I wanted more than anything to go, but my mother wouldn't permit it.

"Please," I said. "It's going to be so much fun."

When she shook her head, I said: "I'm going anyway."

She grabbed a wire coat hanger and came toward me. "I'll kill you before I'll let you go!" she shouted.

I tried to fight her off. I was only fourteen—and still small and slight—but I *had* to fight back. By the time they pulled her off me, I was cut and bleeding in half a dozen places.

I knew that it was all, somehow, related to the mystery. "Bums," "tramps," she called my friends. I was told regularly that I was bound to come home pregnant, but she told me none of the facts of life. The year I was fifteen, I managed to go to a big party, and the next day I announced to my mother: "I think I got pregnant. I kissed Lenny three times."

"Is that all?"

"Yes," I said, hoping she'd be impressed. Lenny was one of the handsomest boys in our group.

"Are you absolutely sure that's all?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, you can't get pregnant that way."

"Then how do you get pregnant?"

She told me it was sordid and dirty and that I was not to think about it, ever.

My mother insisted upon taking me to school every day until the ninth grade, when I told her that if she continued to accompany me I simply wouldn't go. After that I'd cut school whenever I could, and go instead to the public library. It was peaceful there and I could read Dumas, *Anna Karenina, Wuthering Heights,* and other books without being told they were filthy and obscene. I had been two years ahead in school, but as the tension at home increased, my work got poorer. We kept moving from one apartment to another, and the changes were unsettling.

In school I took every course I could in sketching and painting. I also took violin lessons, and played and sang with the school orchestra. Music transported me out of the tension and despair about my future. After junior high school my parents had announced that they would not be sending me to college; I didn't know how to go about arranging for college myself, since I was not only young but highly immature.

So, soon after I finished high school, I got married.

WALTER WAS AS HANDSOME as Victor Mature. I was young and impetuous, and the arguments in my home had reached epic dimensions. I had been working after school in the five-and-ten, but the work was dreary and held no promise. Walter and marriage meant freedom and happiness—or so I thought.

I knew after my honeymoon that I had married too soon, for the wrong reasons, to a person who was wrong for me. When I told my mother I wanted a divorce, she said: "You'll disgrace us."

Several months later, when I learned I was pregnant, I realized how big a mistake I'd made. I was no longer in love with my husband, though we continued to live together, and I was not nearly ready to be a mother. But my fears went beyond this: I began to fear for my child, whether it would be *normal.*

Throughout my adolescence, I had tried to forget the name Anna Fisher. But when I became pregnant, it began to return at odd moments during the day and night. In my mind, I put my hand into that drawer again, smelled the sachet, drew forth the black paper, and rushed into the kitchen. I could hear myself challenging my mother: "Am *I* Anna Fisher?"

If I *was* adopted, whose genes was I carrying? Were there abnormalities that might skip me but be passed on to my child? If I *was* adopted, why had I been given up for adoption? Was it because there was something wrong with my parents?

To give birth is to establish the hereditary link. It forces you to think about your own heritage—to wonder about the characteristics, the traits and talents of someone whose genes you carry. The adoptee can go back no further than himself; beyond that there is a wall. And fear of what is behind that wall can cause trouble.

I was in labor for four days. I wanted to become a mother, yet I was petrified at the thought. I thought the labor pains would never stop. I kept hearing the words "Anna Fisher"; deep inside I was desperately afraid of what I would produce.

When my time finally came, I was given a caudal anesthetic. Throughout the delivery I was wide-awake, and when the nurse pulled a gauze over my eyes I pushed it away.

"No," I said. "I must see my child as soon as it's born."

When they had cleaned my boy, they lifted him up for me to

see: he had two arms and two legs. "Is he all right?" I asked the doctor. "Is he normal?" When they brought him to me, I kept poking him gently. He *looked* all right.

The first thing visitors said was: "Florence, he looks just like you!" No words could have thrilled me more. I remembered all those days I had spent with the family photographs. I had never seen another person who looked like me until now. I picked Glenn up and held him in front of the hospital mirror. Yes, he did look like me. There could be no doubt about it. This person was a part of me, as I must be a part of someone else, somewhere in the world. I felt warm and *connected.*

Still, I watched Glenn apprehensively during his first year. He crawled on schedule, he began to talk, and there was quick happiness in his eyes, but he couldn't walk. Then, at fourteen months, he suddenly got up without holding on to anything, set his little bowlegs down one after the other, and took his first steps.

THAT same year, something happened that changed my entire relationship with my mother. She had always suffered from migraine headaches, but now they grew unbearable. She'd clutch her head and grow dizzy. "She needs a psychiatrist," I told my father, "not a general physician."

"What are you saying?" he shouted. "Your mother's crazy?"

Despite his protests, I took my mother to a psychiatrist and told him about a nervous breakdown she'd once had. He examined her, then said unequivocally that she should go to a home for mental patients and receive shock treatment.

When she came out of the home that spring, she was calmer and more rational than I had ever known her. We talked frequently and often met for lunch at a downtown restaurant. She adored Glenn and was extremely kind and gentle with him.

For the first time in my life she seemed a real mother, someone I could talk to, share my problems with. Her treatment of me had never been caused by meanness but by some hysterical desire that now was stilled. Perhaps the secret meant nothing to her anymore. I never asked her. After all the years of pain and mystery, I had a mother; that and her health were what mattered now.

But one day while we were eating lunch, the fork suddenly dropped from her hand. Her fingers could not pick it up again.

I took her out to a cab and we went to my apartment, where I insisted she stay for a few days while tests were being done. As the days became weeks, she began to have difficulty standing, and soon I had to feed and dress her. My father moved in with us too; and with him came not only all my parents' furniture, but also his constant criticisms about the way I ran my household.

One day my mother collapsed and was rushed to the hospital. It was a brain tumor. I wasn't prepared for the sight of her on the hospital bed after her operation. She was ghostly pale, and in place of her wavy silver hair there was a tightly wound bandage. From her arms, rubber tubes extended into an elaborate apparatus. I could not bear it. Had I found a mother only to lose her?

Morning after morning for six weeks I went to the hospital. My girl friend Raye would take Glenn, and I'd stay all day, go home to cook dinner for my father and Walter, and then return in the evening. My mother scarcely moved a muscle. Her vacant eyes recognized no one except me. Sometimes, when I approached, she'd say: "Florence. Glenn." The words were scarcely audible.

Finally a day came when I found her breathing in spasmodic gasps. Her lips were blue. I touched her hand. It was cold. Oh, God, I thought. Don't let her die. Not now. Not when I've just found her. She *was* my mother. We had shared, if only for a brief moment, a warm and tender love.

Taking her hand lightly in my own, I said: "Mother . . . Mother?" I felt her fingers close tightly around my hand. "I'm here. I'm Florence. I love you, Mother," I said softly.

And then, from the depths of somewhere, she uttered these words: "Now you'll . . . have . . . no one."

She said nothing more. When I could bear the strain no longer, I rushed from the ward. By the time I got home, someone at the hospital had phoned to say my mother was dead.

MY FATHER had chosen a plain pine box. It upset me terribly when I saw it, and I pleaded with him to bury my mother in a better coffin. "I'll pay for the difference," I said, but he raged

against any change, said it was a waste. I was in no condition to stand against him.

During the simple afternoon funeral a light drizzle started. By three thirty, when we were preparing to leave the cemetery, it was as dark as night. The wind and rain kept getting stronger, and several of our umbrellas blew inside out.

In the pelting rain, our funeral party drove to my home. Before any of us were settled, several of my relatives went over to the cabinet that held all my mother's crystal. One of them picked up a vase and said: "Well, I want *this* to remember Aunt Rose."

"And I want this," said another, taking a smaller vase.

I knew my mother had been kind to these women when we lived in Brooklyn. If they loved her, why did they need her crystal to remember her by? All evening, as my relatives selected pieces of my mother's crystal and then left, my desolation grew.

Finally all the family were gone except Aunt Gert, one of my mother's sisters. She announced that she would stay with us and observe the Orthodox Jewish period of mourning. "I'm going to stay here all week, Florence, and help you," she said.

My father insisted that the electricity be turned off and that we light candles. I left him and Aunt Gert sitting in the eerie, flickering candlelight, and went alone to the living-room window. The storm was still increasing. The winds howled, the trees swayed in huge arcs. I saw the garbage-can covers fly across the backyard. The rain swept across the little yard in great sheets.

My mother is out there, I thought, all alone. I had an image of her in that flimsy pine box. She had said that I would have no one. Whom did she have now? I started to cry softly. As the storm grew worse, the tempest inside me kept mounting to a terrible pitch. That night—it was November 15, 1950—I could not sleep.

THE next morning, while I was feeding Glenn in his high chair, Aunt Gert said: "What's going to be with the jewelry?"

"What do you want?" my father asked.

In a moment they were in the middle of an animated discussion about my mother's jewelry—the jewelry she had pawned over the years for the sake of her family and then, item by item, scrupu-

lously redeemed. I listened for a few minutes and then took my son and went into the living room.

Hour after hour their conversation droned on. "I want the pendant for Ellen, and the ring for Sam. I think the hair comb is pretty. What ever happened to Rose's diamond earrings?"

I came into the room, but they didn't see me. Once I walked between the two of them, but they didn't stop talking. I served them lunch and they spoke not one word to me. I might as well not have been there. Was this what my mother had meant when she said: "Now you'll have no one"?

Anna Fisher. As they talked on and on, the name kept ringing in my ears.

My mother had wanted me to have her jewelry. But I didn't care about the jewelry. I only wanted them to acknowledge my presence. I wanted to scream: "I'm her daughter. Why don't you ask me what should be done?"

And then it hit me. If I were *really* my mother's child, my aunt wouldn't *dare* do this. No aunt would haggle over a mother's things without consulting her only daughter. No true father would permit it.

Finally I could stand no more. I called my friend Raye. "Please come and get me out of this house," I pleaded.

When Raye honked, I wrapped up Glenn and went out to her car. At her home, I told her everything that had happened; I spilled out all my suspicions, my fears. When she finally calmed me down, I said: "Raye, I *know* I was adopted. Somebody's got to tell me the truth. I've got to know—tonight."

"Who can you ask?" Raye said.

I thought for a moment, discarded a few possibilities, and then made a long-distance phone call to a cousin-in-law on Long Island. Susan was old enough to know, for she had married into the family when I was five or six; and I believed her to be honest.

"I must know," I said without preamble. "Am I adopted?"

She said: "Why do you want to know?"

I told her what was happening at my apartment, then about finding the paper years before. "For God's sake, tell me, Sue. I'm not a baby. I have a *right* to know."

There was a long silence. Then I heard a sigh. "Well, when you found the paper," Susan explained, "your mother destroyed everything—every one of the papers. I begged her to tell you, but she refused. She said she'd kill anyone who told you."

"No, no," I said quietly.

"She swore everybody to secrecy, Florence, and thought that if she destroyed the papers you'd never know. You were only a child; you'd forget having seen anything."

All those long, lonely years—thinking of that paper, dreaming of it. Now I knew. I had found a mother—and lost her. There was only limbo now. I was *nobody's* child.

I asked in a flat voice: "Who was my mother? Who was my father?"

Susan thought she'd heard that my mother was a teacher, my father a law student or a lawyer. She didn't know their names. They might have come from Philadelphia, she told me, because when Harry Ladden's firm moved there from New York, Rose didn't want to go for fear she'd meet my real mother someday on the street. "The adoption was the reason you moved so often when you were a teen-ager. She'd tell someone in the neighborhood and then develop a terrible fear of that person telling you.

"I don't know anything else, Florence," she concluded, "and I'm afraid no one else does, either. She was terribly secretive about it."

When I got off the phone, I began to wrack my brain for some way to learn more. My father, I was sure, wouldn't tell me, and I didn't want to call Uncle Abe. He would know something, but I didn't want him to know I *wanted* to know. It would only hurt him. After a few moments I said to Raye: "When we lived in New York, a Dr. Alvin P. Green took care of me."

I called New York information; there *was* a Dr. Alvin P. Green in Brooklyn. I dialed the number and the doctor answered.

"Dr. Green," I said, "you may not remember me, but you took care of me when I was little. My name is Florence Ladden and—"

"Oh," he said. "You mean the adopted child?"

The adopted child. I couldn't help crying, and he must have heard my sobs as I said haltingly: "I just found out."

He said: "I thought they told you."

"They never told me," I said. "Dr. Green, do you know *anything* about me? Who my mother was?"

"I delivered you," he said coldly. "Why do you want to know?"

"My mother just died," I said, "and now I find she wasn't my real mother. If you delivered me, you *must* know all about me." The questions came tumbling out: "What's my real mother's name? Where is she? Who was my father? What did my mother look like? Please tell me *something* about her."

His reply came in belligerent tones: "I'm not going to tell you anything. You have absolutely no right to this information."

"*No right?* It's my life. Of course I have a right to know." I was angry and hurt. "Can't you understand, Dr. Green?"

He could not. He was adamant in his refusal to help me. He only admitted that he had arranged the adoption. Both women had been his patients: one for prenatal care, the other because she could not become pregnant. When I told him that I was coming to New York to see him, that I *had* to know, he said: "Under no circumstances, young woman, will I give you any further information whatsoever." He hung up the receiver.

Later, Walter came to pick me up. We had grown further apart; we were only technically married now. In the car, he asked why I'd left my father and my aunt alone at a time like this.

I told him about my father and Aunt Gert and the jewelry, and what I had found out from Susan and how nasty Dr. Green had been.

"So?" he said.

"Don't you understand?" I asked. "I have to find out."

"What difference does it make?"

I watched the rain beating against the windshield as the car wove through the leaf-plastered streets. "It makes all the difference," I said, "to me."

He lectured me on how ungrateful I was, how my adoptive parents had taken me out of the gutter, how I was desecrating my mother's name by even thinking of going to look for my real mother. And during the week when I should be sitting in mourning! I should be ashamed.

All week, while my father and Aunt Gert haggled over my

mother's belongings, the fact of my adoption haunted me. Walter's harsh words kept coming back. Was I *really* ungrateful? What difference *did* it make? Finally I decided that no matter how long it took, I could not abandon my search for the meaning of the name Anna Fisher. Dr. Green would *have* to see me.

Part Two: *The Search*

3

MANY adoptees, when they learn they are adopted, are reluctant to undertake what they call The Search. They are afraid of hurting their adoptive parents, whom they may love deeply. Some fear what they'll find out. Others simply don't care to find out anything.

But I cared. I no longer troubled myself about whether I should look, only *how*. I wanted some information that would lead me back to my origins. Twenty years was a long time, but already I'd been lucky; I had the name of a man who knew my natural parents, or at least my mother, and who had delivered me.

I also had a name, Anna Fisher, but I didn't know if it was real. My parents might be named Fisher, or they might not. They might live in New York or Philadelphia—or in Kalamazoo. They might be dead.

I was not a professional tracer of missing persons; I didn't know how to start. How would *you* begin to look for two people who had conceived you all those years ago?

I took a wild chance. I called the New York City Department of Health and asked them where I should write for a copy of my birth certificate. I knew my birth date, I trusted my memory of the name Anna Fisher, and I remembered that my mother had told me about her delivery in St. Anthony's Hospital. I was told to write to the Bureau of Records and Statistics in Brooklyn. I did so, signing the letter "Anna Fisher."

Two weeks later I plucked the official envelope from my mailbox. Out fell a photostat—a black paper with white writing on it.

My immediate reaction was disappointment. This was not the paper I had found in my mother's drawer fifteen years earlier. It

did not mention Rose and Harry Ladden, and referred only to a Baby Fisher. But there was other information, so I could add to my slowly growing store of knowledge about my origins:

Mother: Florence Cohen
Father: Frederick Fisher
Father's Occupation: clerk
Mother's Occupation: housewife
Mother's Married Name: Florence Fisher

My mother's address was listed as 695 Broadway, in Brooklyn.

Susan had said my father was a lawyer or law student, and my mother a teacher. No matter. This had to be my real birth certificate: the date and the hospital were the same, and the name Fisher. It was not the paper I remembered, but at least it was something solid. In a curious way, it was confirmation that I really existed.

On Friday, December 22, in a raging blizzard, Raye and I drove to New York to see Dr. Green.

We walked into the empty waiting room and sat on the couch for ten minutes, fidgeting with magazines. When the door to the doctor's office opened, a medium-sized man in a white smock walked out. He was about sixty, with a slight mustache and thin-rimmed glasses. When he saw me, he gave a short gasp.

I stood up and said: "I'm Florence Ladden."

"Yes," he said. Why had he seemed so startled, as if he'd seen someone he thought long dead? He was obviously irritated, even angry, and asked what I wanted.

"I'd like to talk to you," I said. "I've come all the way from Philadelphia." I walked past him into his office, uninvited. When he followed, I took out my birth certificate. "I didn't have this when I called you. Florence Cohen is my mother and Frederick Fisher is my father. Now I know everything." I placed the paper on the desk in front of him.

Dr. Green took the paper and, scarcely glancing at it, flipped it roughly across his desk. "You shouldn't have that," he said. "Frederick Fisher was not your father," he continued coarsely. "You

never had a father. Your mother lied. There never was a Frederick Fisher. Can't you understand? You're illegitimate."

I began to choke up, but I persisted in my questions. His answers were hostile. "So what if they didn't tell you? The Laddens took you in when no one else wanted you. Didn't you have a good home? Aren't you grateful? What can be gained by this? I don't know where your mother is and if I did I wouldn't tell you."

The past months had been devastating for me. I had come to this man for some compassion. I needed someone to put his arms around me and tell me: "Florence, it's all right." I pleaded with him, but his tone only became more belligerent. I knew he knew more. Why wouldn't he tell me? What could it mean to him?

At last he said: "Look, don't bother me. Get out of here." He took my arm, led me to the door, and said: "And don't come back."

RAYE returned to Philadelphia on Sunday, but I had to stay. Dr. Green's rebuffs had only whetted my desire to press further in my search. The birth certificate had given 695 Broadway, in Brooklyn, as my mother's address at the time of my birth. Early on Monday, I headed for Brooklyn. It was Christmas Day. My plan was to go to every apartment in the building, hoping to find someone who had lived there for more than twenty years. There was the slim chance that someone would remember her.

I went from door to door. Over and over I said: "My mother once lived in this building," and showed my birth certificate. "Have you lived here for more than twenty years?"

What a lonely Christmas Day it was, and how desolate I felt checking off the apartments one by one in a notebook, repeating so often that I was looking for my mother that I began to choke and cry on the words. Several tenants had been living there long enough, but no one remembered anyone by the name of Cohen or Fisher ever having lived at 695 Broadway.

ON JANUARY 12, 1951—a Friday—I went to New York again, this time to visit the place of my birth, St. Anthony's Hospital. The hospital, I knew, would have had to keep complete records. I asked the nurse at the information window if I could please see



the mother superior, and was led into a nearby room and introduced to a nun sitting behind a small desk. The facts of my origins might be in one of her filing cabinets.

"I was born here," I said when I was seated. The nun smiled warmly at me. "Here's my birth certificate. I'm adopted."

The smile froze and a frown crossed her face.

"I'm looking for my mother," I said. "I'm sure you have complete records here—"

"I'm terribly sorry," she said, interrupting me. "There's nothing we can do for you."

She asked me about my adoptive home. "Don't you feel that you owe your loyalty to the people who raised you, cared for you? Dwell," she continued, "on the terrible fate that would have befallen you had these good people not taken you into their home."

I looked at the gilded cross that hung from the nun's neck. I told her that I had a child of my own, that I had a *right* to know.

"I find myself at a great loss," she said in measured tones, "to understand this idle curiosity."

Idle curiosity?

"You are not a product of your natural parents. You are what your adoptive parents made you."

I begged her to reconsider.

"There is nothing we can do for you. The records are private." She stood and indicated that I was to leave. As I rose, she said: "I would appreciate it if you did not return."

I left St. Anthony's in a daze. Would it always be like this? I had tried to press both Dr. Green and the nun—and I had held back a great emotional scream that urged me to press them still further. I had so few sources, and each one was precious.

I wanted to cram as much into that day as possible, so I had planned one more stop—the surrogate's court in Brooklyn. If there had been a legal paper in my adoptive parents' possession, the original must be on file in the district in which the adoption took place. It was a raw day and I went directly to the courthouse by subway, without eating lunch.

In the Hall of Records, I asked one of the clerks: "May I see the adoption records, please?"

I had expected resistance. There was none.

"Of course," he said casually. "They're in those huge ledgers. Find the year you're looking for, and then take the ledger to one of the tables."

Using my birth certificate as a guide, I went through several of the ledgers. There it was: my Order of Adoption. I felt a shiver of excitement. There was that name "Anna Fisher" and my adoptive parents' names. I read rapidly, starved for any new scrap of information. "An investigation having been made by George D. Usk," it read, "with the consent of Florence Fisher and Frederick Fisher," the court felt the welfare of Anna Fisher would be improved by this adoption. On the back of the document was an attorney's name, Milton Wax, and his address.

This was not the paper I had found when I was seven; that one had been shorter, and I remembered that some lines had been drawn across it. This one had no lines. Where was the other paper?

But I was too overjoyed to think further about the discrepancy. I had photostats made of both sides of the document. Then, noting

the address of the lawyer, Milton Wax, I hurried from the building. He would have known my mother and—if I really had one—my father. I couldn't wait to get uptown.

THE office was small and drab, and the secretary said that Mr. Wax was out.

"I'll wait," I said. "I must see Mr. Wax this afternoon." I sat tensely in the waiting room, looking up each time the phone rang.

"Mr. Wax," I heard the secretary say into the phone, "there's somebody waiting to see you." He must have asked to speak to me, for she motioned for me to come over and take the receiver.

I took a deep breath and said: "Mr. Wax, this is Florence Ladden. I understand you arranged my adoption." I gave him the details and added: "I've just come from the surrogate's court where I got my Order of Adoption and—"

"You're not supposed to have that!" he barked.

"I just discovered I was adopted, and it's extremely important for me to find out anything you can tell me about my mother."

"You have no right to any information whatsoever," he said sharply. "You were adopted legally. Rose and Harry Ladden were your parents. You had no other parents."

"I had two other parents," I said quietly. "Florence Cohen and Frederick Fisher."

I heard an impatient sigh. Then he told me abruptly that he didn't want to see me, that he was not coming back to his office that afternoon, and that I should not return.

I went downstairs, dejected, lonely, helpless. I drank a cup of coffee, then walked over to the New York Public Library. I often went to a library when I was upset or wanted to be quiet. But when I got inside, I could not sit still. I took out the Order of Adoption and looked at it carefully. Why hadn't I thought of the obvious? I went to the current Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Bronx telephone directories. Was it possible that I could simply pick up the phone and speak to one of my parents?

There were hundreds of Fishers and perhaps thousands of Cohens. I took out all the nickels I had and called five or six "F" or "Frederick" Fishers first. None of them remotely fit the man I

was looking for, nor did they know *my* Frederick Fisher. I knew I was grasping blindly at straws, but I was desperate and I knew of no other way to continue my search. I got more nickels.

It was late in the afternoon when I returned to Wax's office, sure he was in now. Distasteful as it was to turn up where I wasn't wanted, I hoped maybe he would tell me something, anything.

I had eaten practically nothing all day. By the time I got to the office I was shaking violently. At the door I straightened my hair, mustered all my remaining strength—which was little enough—and walked in. I felt like a little girl begging for a favor.

"Is Mr. Wax back?" I asked the secretary.

"Yes," she said, answering quickly—and then remembering.

"Would you please tell him that Florence Ladden has come back and that I'd like to see him."

She buzzed the intercom, reported that I was in the outer office, and then told me to speak into the box.

I said: "Look, Mr. Wax, if you feel that you really can't give me all the information I want, I'll understand. But please, please just open up the door and tell me if I look like my mother."

He flatly refused.

"Who will it hurt?" I pleaded. "Can't you just tell me, was she short? Was she tall? Did we have the same ears or eyes or nose? Just look at my face. Please." Why should it matter if I looked like someone else? But it did matter: it was a connection.

"You have absolutely no right to any information. . . ."

Please, I thought. Say something kind.

"Weren't your parents good to you?" he asked.

That question again—the intimation that I should be eternally grateful, and therefore my quest was ridiculous and irrelevant. Why couldn't anyone understand?

I heard him saying: "Please don't disturb me again. Ever." The intercom went dead.

It was dark when I left the building. I felt drained, frustrated, confused. I clenched my fists. I wanted to go boldly back to that closed door, open it, and confront the man directly. But I was too young—and too shattered.

WHEN I RETURNED TO Philadelphia, I felt a tremendous loneliness that welled up out of some deep longing inside me. I moved in a daze, unable to concentrate on anything. My husband noticed this and berated me for going on with my "adolescent search."

It became an obsession. If I saw someone on the street who looked like me, I'd turn and follow her. If someone idly said to me: "You look like someone I know," I felt I had to pursue it. I'd say I was adopted and that I didn't know who my parents were. Maybe I have a sister; maybe I have a mother or father somewhere. "Is it possible you've seen one of them?" I felt I could not afford to pass up any chance, however remote.

Several times I pumped my cousin Susan for more leads, and once she reiterated that she thought my parents had come from Philadelphia. I had forgotten that she'd mentioned it the night she'd first told me I was adopted.

Well, I thought, I'll do what I can here. So I called every Cohen and Fisher in the Philadelphia phone book.

About halfway through the list of Fishers, a woman answered and said: "Why do you want to find Frederick Fisher?"

I detected a slight southern accent, and a wariness I'd learned to recognize. Struggling to maintain my calm, I said: "He's my father. I was given up for adoption."

The woman said bluntly: "I can't help you." Her voice was downright antagonistic.

I said: "If you don't know him, why did you ask that question? Please," I went on, "if you know my father, take my number and then if he wants to contact me he can do so. My number is—"

She said: "I can't be bothered," and the phone clicked.

I called her right back, but she hung up immediately. She hung up on me three more times in the next two days.

I could have sworn that this woman knew a Frederick Fisher. Twenty years later, I learned I was right—and that her lie had cost my father and me twenty years of our lives.

IN MAY 1952, eighteen months after my mother died, I returned to New York to live. Lack of communication between my husband and me had made it pointless to prolong our marriage.

I had always wanted to fill my life with the things I loved—music, theater, good books, and the handcrafting of such things as hats and handbags. So, while I was determined to see my search through, I was also determined not to let it destroy me. I wanted to use my energies and talents productively.

When I remarried several years later, one of the first things my husband, Stan, and I did—as soon as we could afford it—was to buy an old upright piano. I began, with the greatest delight, to take piano and singing lessons. I had always been able to play by ear, but now I would make up for all those years when I hadn't had the opportunity to study music.

I had begun to work for a law firm as a legal secretary, but I found time to attend music school several evenings a week. Soon I had mastered the beginners' lessons and moved on to Bach and Chopin. I had a hunger not to let life pass me by. I wanted my new marriage to be good and my life full.

I continued to read constantly, expanding my interests to Sigrid Undset, Kafka, and Dostoevski. I took lessons in Afro-Cuban dancing, I taught myself Spanish and Italian. I had always loved Italian music and still remembered many Neapolitan songs I'd learned from that marvelous Italian family in Brooklyn.

Stan and I went to the opera several times a week during the season, and I especially loved *Turandot* and Verdi's *Otello*. I would love to have been an entertainer, to have sung in Broadway musical comedies; but if it was too late for that, I could still enjoy the best music New York had to offer.

WHILE I was making a new life in New York, my adoptive father had remarried in Philadelphia. The jewelry which had precipitated my call to Susan went to his second wife. All I was given, and only after I pleaded for them, were my mother's wedding band and the engagement ring I'd always cherished.

When his second wife died, I returned to Philadelphia for the funeral. She was buried near my mother, in a cemetery far from the city. Though by now I had turned away from religion, I had a strong impulse to perform the traditional Jewish rite of putting a little stone on my mother's grave, to show I remembered her.

After the funeral service, I told my father what I was going to do.

He said: "I don't want you to."

"Why?" I asked. "You were married to her for thirty-nine years."

"Because I said so." The words brought back in a rush all the times when he'd cut off discussion with that same phrase.

"If you do," he continued, "I'm going to leave you here."

I couldn't believe he meant it. It was a freezing midwinter day, and late; there was no public transportation back to the city. I walked over to my mother's grave, picked up a stone from the frozen earth, and placed it on the simple marble marker. I stood there for a moment, remembering our last months together and the pine box and the November storm.

When I turned back, I saw my father and his wife's family getting into their cars. I stood watching in astonishment as the cars disappeared slowly into the half-darkness. There was not another person in sight. They'll wait for me at the gate, I thought.

I started out on foot, but all the plots looked the same and I was soon lost. It was dark by now and I could only stumble along, half frozen, hoping I was going in the right direction. When I finally got to the gatehouse about an hour later, the caretaker was good enough to call someone with a car.

I must have wanted a father sorely, for sometime later I invited my adoptive father to stay with us in New York. He was a dour guest, always complaining, but he became especially acrimonious one evening when I finally asked him about my adoption. "Look," I said. "I know I'm adopted. I have my birth certificate and my Order of Adoption." I brought out the two documents and laid them in front of him.

He grunted. "I'm not going to talk about it."

"Why can't you even admit that you adopted me?" I asked.

He got up and left the room.

Two days after he returned to Philadelphia, I discovered that the documents were missing. I searched every corner of our small apartment, then I phoned my father. He said he knew nothing about any papers. I never saw them again.

When he died some years later, I could not bring myself to go to his funeral.



THROUGHOUT THESE YEARS, I constantly returned to each fragment of information I had secured. I tried to trace George D. Usk, the investigator listed on my Order of Adoption. But I was too late: he had died several years earlier.

I even returned to Dr. Green, on the pretense that I needed medical attention; I knew that if I told him I wasn't well, he'd have to see me. But he had not softened in the least.

Regularly I called St. Anthony's Hospital. Brush your teeth, comb your hair, and call St. Anthony's: this became a fixed morning ritual in my life for years. I was becoming stronger now. I tried different approaches; none succeeded. Either the person I got on the phone would recognize my voice and hang up, or she'd tell me that they were not allowed to give the information I requested.

And when I revisited the area around 695 Broadway, I found not one shred of evidence that Florence Cohen or Florence Fisher or Frederick Fisher had ever lived there.

For more than fifteen years of our marriage, I told Stan little about my phone calls to St. Anthony's, my forays to the library, my calls to a thousand Cohens and Fishers. Stan is sensible, thoughtful, and devoted; I knew he would understand. But I had resolved that this search would not become a burden to him.

4

I HAD not yet investigated one avenue: the courts and the law. Working, as I was, in a law firm, I thought there might be a way to acquire the information I wanted from the court itself.

My work was immensely rewarding. The lawyers were warm, intelligent, and even scholarly men who took a special interest in me, patiently explaining the fine points of the law. Following my father's visit, I told the partner I worked for about the document I had found in the drawer as a child, and that I had secured my adoption papers but that they'd been lost.

"How did you get those papers in the first place?" he asked.

I told him I had simply gone to the surrogate's court.

He was amazed. "Who showed you your file?"

"What file?"

"The one on your adoption. It would have contained a great number of papers connected with your case."

"I got my paper from a large ledger with a heavy binding; it was there with hundreds of other Orders of Adoption."

"Umm. That should have been sealed, too," he mused.

I said quickly: "I want to see that file."

He got up from behind his large mahogany desk and put his arm around my shoulder. "Someone goofed, Florence," he told me. "Your birth certificate should have been sealed or altered, and you should never have been permitted to see your Order of Adoption. All documents pertaining to an adoption are sealed permanently by the state. You'll never be able to get them."

My whole world started to fall away. The attorney went over to his leather-bound statute books, pulled out a large volume, and turned to the Domestic Relations Law. "'No person'," he read, "'shall be allowed access to such sealed records and order and any index thereof except upon an order of a judge or surrogate of the court in which the order was made or of a justice of the supreme court.'" He looked up to see if I understood, and then continued: "'No order for access and inspection shall be granted except on due notice to the foster [adoptive] parents and on good cause shown.'"

I was stunned. I had lost that most precious of documents, and now I knew I might never see it again. Why hadn't I made copies? Worse, how had I missed perhaps the one chance I would ever have to secure a whole file on myself? All the papers were there, even the one I had found when I was seven.

I asked every lawyer in the office if he could petition the court for me to open the records. All were sympathetic, but all thought it useless. One said: "You must show good cause."

And nothing, apparently, was good enough cause. The matter was left to the discretion of the judge, and none of the attorneys had ever heard of a case in which a petition had even been made, let alone granted.

I panicked. I had a Flying Dutchman kind of feeling: doomed, because those records were sealed, to wander my whole life and never find the answers I sought.

THERE WAS ONE LAWYER on the floor of the building, though, who was not attached to the firm, and for whom I occasionally worked in the evenings. He was a generous, sweet person. I told him my story and he agreed to help if he possibly could. Stan and I had little money in those years, but I asked the lawyer if I could pay him a few dollars a week for his services. He refused. "Then I'll do extra work for you," I insisted. Reluctantly he agreed.

Some weeks later he told me he had made a connection at the court. He dictated a letter which I typed, instructing a clerk in the surrogate's court to release one document, my Order of Adoption. He said it was impossible to get the rest of my file opened.

That same day I took the subway out to Brooklyn. By the time I entered the old courthouse I was a mass of nerves.

I made a small payment to a clerk of the court for the photostat of my Order of Adoption. But before I took the clerk's receipt, I summoned all my courage and whispered: "Will you take more money and allow me to get photostats of the rest of the file?" It was the first time I had ever tried to bribe someone.

The clerk's head jerked up. "Absolutely not!" he said. "You have no right to the contents of that file."

"I have every right," I said quietly, my voice growing stronger with each word. "I'm Anna Fisher—and that's my file."

"Impossible," he said.

"Who can I see," I asked, trying to sound as forceful as possible, "who will allow me *one look* at the contents of my own file?"

"No one."

"I want to see a judge," I announced.

"Just take this note, lady," he said, scribbling on a form, "and get your Order of Adoption before we change our minds." He directed me to the far end of the room.

The clerk who took the authorization note was a dapper little man with patent-leather hair, a small, neat mustache, and a tight jacket on his small frame. He took the paper from me without a word and walked brusquely, officiously, into a large file room. In a few moments he was back with a large manila envelope, which he placed on the counter between us. He took some papers out and began to finger through them rapidly.

I had to try. "Please, can I see the papers?"

He looked up sharply. "Are you kidding?" he said. "This file is sealed. You're lucky to get this much." He had found the Order of Adoption and separated it from the other papers.

"Please," I said in desperation. "It's my life. Those are my papers. I'm Anna Fisher. *Why* can't you give them to me?"

He looked at the sheaf of papers in his hand, tucked them quickly back into the envelope, and then placed the envelope on the counter again. "You haven't got a chance of ever seeing these papers," he said. "You got to get special permission from the judge, lady, and he'll never give it to you."

I watched him take the envelope, along with the Order of Adoption, to a large machine. While waiting for it to warm up, he opened the envelope and leafed casually through the papers.

Tears began to fill my eyes. What possible right did this man have to look over my file, to know the facts of my birth—the identities of my mother and my father, everything I hungered for—while these documents were barred from my sight?

I felt so violent I could hardly breathe. When he returned with the copy I'd been authorized to get, I grabbed it, turned from him without a word, and bolted out of the building.

The January air did not cool my rage. I leaned against one of the pillars of the building and tried to catch my breath. I felt, at that moment, the most awful despair I had known in all my searching. I actually hated myself for not snatching that envelope and running. Sealed. Those papers were sealed forever now.

How did they dare pass a law like this? Where were my constitutional rights? Even though my mother had carried me in her womb, these people wanted me to believe that my life didn't begin the day she gave birth to me—but on the day I was adopted.

The lawyers in my office had told me that one of the purposes of the law was to remove the stigma of illegitimacy. How could it pretend to do that when the very sealing perpetuated a stigma? Not that I had ever felt ashamed. Even when Dr. Green had told me that I had no father, I had felt hurt by his cruelty, but never soiled.

I tried to leave the pillar but could not move my legs. My teeth

chattered; my hands were ice-cold. They talk about what's been done *for* you, I thought; they say nothing about what's been done *to* you. You're there to satisfy everyone's needs: those of your natural mother—who, for whatever reason, made her choice and gave you up for adoption; and those of your adoptive parents—who wanted to have a child. If there was an adoption agency involved, they got their cut. And when, after you've satisfied everybody's needs—all without your consent—you ask some natural questions, they say: "You have no right to know."

I looked back into the surrogate's court. Most of the lights were out now, the judges leaving with their briefcases, the clerks and secretaries trooping out. I am inside that building, I thought. I *am* those records and I am sealed, buried alive. The society that withholds those records is telling me that I have no right to myself.

Why did certain things give me joy or sorrow? Why did I feel exalted by beautiful music? Why as a child did I save my pennies to go to concerts? Why as an adult did I paint and sketch and make hats and handbags without any training or encouragement?

Blood. Yes, that was the answer. Whom you look like and behave like are in your blood. Those who know their parents have the luxury of saying: "I look like my father, so what?" When you know, it means nothing; when you don't know, it means your life.

I am going to beat this thing if it takes until the day I die, I promised myself. I am going to find my mother and father.

I WAS overdue for a break. And that first break finally came—through sheer refusal to give up, and plain dumb luck. But first there was another rebuff awaiting me.

Every day when I went to work, I passed within a block of Milton Wax's law office. One Friday in the late 1950s, I decided to try him again. I had no reason to believe that he would see me, but now I was convinced that a no is never final.

There was a new secretary at the desk, and she told me that Mr. Wax had died. I asked to speak with his partner. This man was at least willing to see me. He seemed interested in learning about a need he had never considered before.

Under his questioning I admitted that, yes, my son was nearly

grown and gave me much pleasure, and that I had a fine marriage. I had work I liked and a variety of activities I enjoyed.

"Then," he asked, "why rake up something that's over and done with, that can only cause pain to all concerned?"

I welcomed the opportunity to enlighten someone who seemed genuinely interested. So I explained my feelings.

"Well, I don't have your records," he said, "and if I did, I really wouldn't show them to you." His voice was pleasant but firm. He told me that his partner's widow had all the records, that by law Mrs. Wax had to hold them for several years. But he strongly advised me not attempt to see her, and assured me that she would not let me have the papers I wanted. He refused to tell me where she lived, or what her phone number was.

Mrs. Wax's number was still listed in her husband's name. I called, saying that I wanted to see her on a matter connected with his records. She reluctantly said I could come the next day.

"Your husband was the lawyer for my adoption," I told her when I was seated in her living room. It was a simple room, with well-worn chairs and a sofa covered with a paisley cloth. In one corner I noticed a set of low metal filing cabinets—the records. I told her my story, then pointed to the cabinets.

"I'm not going to keep them much longer," she admitted; then she said she had better call her late husband's partner. I watched her as she dialed. I had the impression she had never, in all the years of her marriage, done a thing without first consulting her husband.

I heard her explaining my visit into the telephone. "What do you think I should do?" she asked, looking over to me. She listened, then hung up, and said to me: "He says I shouldn't show them to you. I shouldn't get involved."

"It's over thirty years," I told her quietly. "Your husband is dead, my adoptive parents are dead—what interest can you possibly have in whether I look at the files or not?"

"I'm sorry," she said.

"The facts of my life are in those papers," I told her. "They're not important to you. You can't be hurt; your husband can't be hurt. *Please* let me see them."

She smiled but shook her head. "His partner told me not to get involved."

"But what involvement is there for you? I only want to look at them. Fifteen minutes. That's all I ask, and then I'll never bother you again." How could she watch me suffer and not help? I began to cry quietly.

"Didn't you have a good adoptive home?" she asked.

The same question. Over and over. To my shame, I found myself pleading with this woman as if my life depended on it. And it did! "Think of your own relationship to your mother and father," I begged, "and to your uncles and aunts and grandparents."

She smiled. "That's an entirely different situation."

"Why? Because you think I am illegitimate? I'm not sure of that, but even if I am, what difference does it make? Don't I want an attachment to my natural family like other people?"

By this time she was growing annoyed. "I'm sure my husband had good reasons for not wanting you to see these records," she said curtly. "Once an adoption has been legalized, people shouldn't come back and ask so many questions."

"Was *I* a part of that bargain?" I asked, my voice breaking. "Don't I have rights?"

"That's really not my affair, is it?"

"It's become your affair." I tried to keep control.

"I want you out of here immediately," she said, her tone firm.

I stood up; my legs were shaking as I turned toward the door.

"I don't want you to bother me ever again," she said.

With no more concrete leads, I could only walk aimlessly through the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn near 695 Broadway, haunt the libraries, and make my morning calls to St. Anthony's.

One day in the mid-1960s the voice at the hospital was one I'd never heard before. The woman sounded quite young. "I'm at Pennsylvania Station," I lied, as I put my morning coffee on the stove. "I'm on my way to California and I *must* have some information from you immediately."

The young woman asked me what I would like.

"Please go to the files and get the records for Anna Fisher," I said. "I was born at St. Anthony's. My mother's name is Florence

Cohen Fisher, and I'm trying to locate my grandparents." I paused for a second, then said: "My grandparents have vanished. And I've only got a couple of minutes between trains. Please hurry."

"Wait just a minute, please," she said.

I was certain she would come back, as had all the others, and say: "I'm sorry, we can't give you this information." Or else I'd hear the familiar *click*.

"Now let me see if I have the right papers," she said. I could hear a crackle on the other end of the phone.

I thought fast. "Well, let's compare information." I recited the names and the address I had learned from my birth certificate. "Do you have anything else?" I asked.

The receiver was silent for a moment. The paper's probably marked, I thought. There has to be a statement on it about my adoption. Don't see the statement. Don't see it! Just read off the—

"Well, your grandfather's name was Morris; your grandmother's name was Hannah."

Rapidly: "Do you have her maiden name?"

"Sweik. They both came from Russia."

"Anything else?"

She read the entire card to me. I made her read it twice. But there was no further information—no address for my grandparents, no other names.

I thanked her and hung up in a state of utter shock. I couldn't believe it. But I hadn't written anything down. "Morris Cohen. Hannah Cohen. Hannah Sweik Cohen." I kept repeating the names as I rushed around the kitchen to find a pencil. I wrote them down—and sat looking at the paper. Could these names be the key? Had someone finally made the goof that would open the locked door? I could have kissed that hospital worker.

I put a record on the phonograph and danced around the apartment. I danced into the bedroom and looked at myself in the mirror. My eyes were wet and I wore a huge smile of joy. Morris Cohen. Hannah Sweik Cohen. I whispered to my reflection: "Florence, you did it!"

Three months later St. Anthony's Hospital was torn down; all its old records were destroyed.

5

FOLLOWING that lucky phone call to the hospital, I returned to Williamsburg full of hope. I now had four people to search for—my mother, my father, and Morris and Hannah Cohen, my grandparents. Again I knocked on all the old doors, visited all the old shops. No one could offer me the slightest help. But breaking the silence of St. Anthony's had given me a great boost.

Soon after I learned the names of my grandparents, I changed my job and went to work for the New York Philharmonic at Lincoln Center. The new job paid less and the hours were long, but I wanted to be near music. During lunch hours I watched the orchestra rehearse, and Stan and I were regularly given complimentary tickets to evening performances.

The job was a source of great happiness to me, but it meant that for several years I had to confine my search to Saturday odysseys and occasional trips to the public library at Forty-second Street. They had microfilm of old telephone directories, and I would stare intently at the screen on which the endless lists of names were projected. There were dozens of Morris Cohens in the directories of the late 1920s and early 1930s; and I knew that Moishe was sometimes changed to Morris, so I looked for Moishes too. But I didn't know which of the many names I jotted down could actually be traced back more than thirty-five years.

One night in early April 1970, after I had finished working on the details for a new concert, I decided to walk across the plaza to the Metropolitan Opera House. It was late, but *La Gioconda* was playing, one of my favorite operas, and I thought I might catch the last act. As I passed through the revolving door, a woman coming out took my arm, smiled, and said: "Hello, how are you?"

I had never seen her before in my life. "Do you know me?" I asked quietly.

"Yes, aren't you—" She mentioned a name I'd never heard.

I shook my head. "No, I'm not," I said. This had happened before, and it was impossible for me to resist. There was always the chance that I had been mistaken for a relative of mine.

I asked her to have a cup of coffee with me at the Opera Cafe. Then I told her I was adopted and that I had to make absolutely sure she didn't know one of my relatives.

That night I couldn't sleep. The woman had not known a Fisher or Cohen who could be related to me, but the thought that I was still confronting strangers with such questions pained me deeply. After all these years of searching, I was not much closer than I had been on the day I'd learned that I was adopted.

Until now I had searched alone. All my husband, Stan, knew was that over the years I'd gotten bits of information; I had not wanted to complicate our marriage. But the next night, as we sat in the kitchen, I decided to tell him everything. Yet suddenly I found myself unable to speak—the tears simply fell.

"What is it, Florence?" Stan asked, worried.

I leaned back against the wall and tried to describe the pain, the *physical* pain, of not knowing. "It's my adoption," I told him. "No one has a right to this power over me. What crime have I committed to have been sentenced to a lifetime in limbo? I've made up my mind," I said. "I'm going to find my parents *this year*." And then I told him in full detail what I had done over the years.

"I didn't know. . . ."

"I've tried to keep it from you," I said. "But I can't bury what I'm feeling anymore. I need your advice."

He didn't hesitate for a moment. He said: "Let's clean it out of your life once and for all."

In the crucial months ahead Stan helped me reason through many of the dilemmas that arose. As I readied myself for a final decisive push, I determined that I would return to the man I had tried when I first began, Dr. Green.

I had often wondered about his cruelty to me. Soon after our meeting I saw a play by Robert Anderson which contained some profound lines about death being for the living—to let us know that life isn't forever, that there isn't enough time to waste on cruelty or meanness.

When I couldn't find Dr. Green listed at his old address, I called the local medical association and learned that he had died

eight years earlier. His lawyer, a Mr. Brooks, put me on the trail of his widow.

Her phone was monitored by an answering service, and by the way she cut in I knew it was her habit to listen and screen calls before speaking herself. At the sound of her voice, I decided to tell her I was a foster child and that I'd been in six or seven homes, from California to New York. I was extremely anxious to know something about my family. Did she have her husband's records?

Mrs. Green was silent for a moment or two and then said: "My husband once told me that an adopted child had come to him looking for help. . . . Are you that child?"

I knew she knew. "Yes," I said.

We talked for another ten minutes. She admitted there were some files and other old things of her husband's around, but couldn't quite remember where. She said she'd look and, when I pressed her, said I could call her back in a day or so.

I phoned her the next day and she said: "I looked. I have nothing. There's no point in your contacting me again."

Dr. Green's lawyer had been kind and helpful on the phone, so I made an appointment to see him. Mr. Brooks was a tall, heavy man in his early fifties. His face was warm and understanding.

"I lied," I said when I was seated in his office. "I wasn't a foster child; I was adopted."

"What made you lie?" he asked in genuine puzzlement.

"Whenever I say I was adopted, people refuse to help me."

He thought this over, then asked: "How can I help?"

I told him I wanted my records, and he suggested that he petition the court on my behalf. I pointed out that other lawyers had investigated this possibility, only to throw up their hands. Without more ado, he called a clerk he knew at the surrogate's court. I listened on an extension phone while he asked about the procedure for preparing a petition.

The clerk said that the records would not be opened for any reason. "Why does she want to see them?" he asked.

"Well," Mr. Brooks said, "she'd like to know who her *real* mother and father are. This woman is over forty years old and frankly I think she has a right—"

"According to the law, she has no right," the clerk snapped. "What about the rights of the other people involved? The natural parents have a right to their privacy. They could be blackmailed. And what about the rights of the adoptive parents?"

When Mr. Brooks had hung up, he turned to me and said: "Let me see what else I can do."

"I don't care what it costs," I said extravagantly, "but I want those records—illegally, any way I can get them. I won't dignify that law by petitioning the court."

His smile was warm. "Let me have a try first," he said, "before you get yourself into serious trouble. If I get the information you want, you can pay me a hundred and twenty-five dollars; if not, the charge will be fifty for my efforts."

This was a ridiculously low figure and I told him so. He said it was fair, and I wrote out a check for fifty dollars as a retainer.

WITH a lawyer working for me now, and my husband at my side, I had a sense of growing strength. I virtually took up residence in the New York Public Library, and there I made a discovery. I realized that my use of the old telephone directories and of Polk's city directories—those marvelous books that listed every resident's name, the name of his wife, his occupation, and his address—had been careless, never systematic.

Emboldened by Mr. Brooks's kindness, I talked to the man in the genealogy division. He was a pleasant young man, and he explained that there were many sources available to me for tracing my genealogy, sources that anyone could gain access to. Birth, death, census, and immigration records; marriage licenses; wills and letters of probate—all these were matters of public record and could not be sealed. I could try the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the Bureau of Records and Statistics, local genealogical societies.

They had been there all this time; I had simply not realized it. In ten minutes, my whole perspective changed.

At his suggestion I got out the volume of Polk's that covers the years 1933 and 1934 and began looking through it with sharper eyes. Slowly I checked out each of the fifty or more Morris and

Moishe Cohens in all the New York directories. In each case where the man had a wife, her name was listed. Only *one* Morris Cohen had a wife named Hannah!

When I saw that line a shiver of excitement shot through me. I was sure I was looking at *my* grandmother and grandfather. Then, thinking that if my mother had not been married—as Dr. Green had insisted—she would have been living with her parents, I went back to those Cohens who had a first name beginning with the letter F. Yes. There was a Florence Cohen living on Kings Highway, at the same address as Morris and Hannah Cohen. I wrote down the address and hurried over to the genealogist.

He nodded and said: "Sure. I'd say that, based on what you've told me, these are your grandparents, and this is where they lived in 1933."

My boss at the Philharmonic agreed to let me take longer lunch hours and I, in turn, promised to stay late when necessary. I was in a state of excited anticipation—like an archaeologist or a treasure hunter who senses that the end is in sight.

Two days later I went back to the genealogy division during my lunch hour. The same pleasant young man greeted me warmly, and handed me a piece of paper on which was written the name Florence Cohen. Beside it were two birth dates.

"After you left," he said in his meditative way, "I thought I'd do a little research of my own. I noted your mother's age at the time you were born, so I checked back to the possible years *she* might have been born—1909, 1910, or 1911." He looked up from the paper, dropped his horn-rimmed glasses down on his nose, and said: "You can write for the birth certificate and that may verify your grandparents' names and give you other information."

"Thank you," I said, moved to tears by his kindness. "From my heart, thank you *very* much."

That night I wrote to the Bureau of Records and Statistics and asked for the birth certificate of Florence Cohen, born on one of two dates in 1910. I said that the correct certificate would list Morris or Moishe Cohen as her father and Hannah Sweik Cohen as her mother. I signed the letter "Florence Cohen."

With the new address in hand, my destination for that Satur-

day, April 18, was decided. The stretch of Kings Highway where the Cohens had lived contained a row of old two-family houses. Stan and I tried the number listed in Polk's first, but no one living there knew anything about any Cohens. We then began the familiar journey up and down the block; but this was a new block, and there was new hope in my heart. We knocked on doors from ten o'clock in the morning until nine at night, but nobody had any help to give.

I HAD questioned almost all the members of my adoptive family repeatedly. Soon, I knew, I'd have to ask Uncle Abe. He would probably know more than anyone else, but I was afraid I would hurt him by revealing my longing for my natural parents.

Meanwhile there were some cousins who had been adults when I was adopted, and who might have valuable information. One evening in early May, I called my cousin Sam. He told me that he *sort of* remembered some talk about a man named Zimmerman. Sam thought Zimmerman was the one who had mentioned there was a child available for adoption. Here was a new last name—a vague, forty-year-old memory that might or might not be accurate.

On Thursday, May 14, I got a call from my lawyer, Mr. Brooks. The information he had obtained—he would never tell me how—cleared up several points. My father, Frederick Fisher, *had* married Florence Cohen in Philadelphia three months before I was born. They separated soon after. But he had signed a form giving his consent to my adoption.

Mr. Brooks had no idea why Dr. Green had told me I was illegitimate. If Frederick Fisher had not been my legal as well as natural father, his consent would not have been required—my mother could have given me up by herself.

Now I had another fact about my life—my parents' marriage—and knowing it I felt stronger, less in limbo.

Mr. Brooks said he would write to Philadelphia for a copy of the marriage license of Frederick Fisher and Florence Cohen. I was still waiting for my mother's birth certificate. I didn't know what these documents would reveal, but there was always the chance of finding another clue.

SATURDAY, MAY 16, 1970, WAS dismal; all day there was a steady fine drizzle. But I wanted to check the address—on Bushwick Avenue—where the Laddens had lived at the time of my adoption, where Zimmerman was supposed to have lived, and then try 695 Broadway for the last time.

Curious images kept flashing in my brain all morning. Three or four blocks from the address, I told Stan that the building would be low, yellow brick, and on a corner. I remembered being rocked in a wicker carriage by someone in black, and crawling on the floor of a very bright sunlit room toward somebody wearing high black shoes.

The building was as I'd envisioned it. How old had I been when we lived in this house? Only Uncle Abe would know.

We began to ring doorbells. For an hour we found no one who remembered either my family or the Zimmermans. But then one woman who had been in the building for more than forty years cocked her head and said Zimmerman sounded familiar. Or maybe the name was Zimmern. But they definitely had a son named Hal, or maybe Al—and possibly a daughter. She couldn't remember when they had left or where they'd gone.

We went back to 695 Broadway. I knew there was no hope of a clue in the building, but there were still old stores in the neighborhood. One clerk, an elderly woman, gave me the phone number of a man named Kalmus, who worked for an electric-company office. He had lived in the area "since the flood," she said.

"Tell me, dear," I heard Kalmus say over the phone after I'd introduced myself, "what can I do to help you?"

When I told him, he became enormously distressed. To this man it was a basic human instinct to look for one's mother. Although he had no actual information, he began to pour out all sorts of ideas. "Did you look in the telephone directory, dear? Did you go to the hospital where you were born?" How naïve he is, and how sweet, I thought. When he asked me if I'd gone to the doctor who'd delivered me, I told him about Dr. Green.

"He threw you out?" he asked, unbelieving. "He should have been barred from practice."

I told him a bit more about my quest, particularly how I had

been searching throughout this area. He said: "In any way I can help will you please let me know immediately? Tell me"—and here he lowered his voice—"you need some money?"

"No, no," I said. I was crying and laughing now. "But you don't even know me!"

"That's all right. I'll help you. Believe me. You should promise you'll come to me if there is any way in the whole world I can be of any help whatsoever."

What an incredible person, I thought as I put down the phone.

It was after four o'clock now, and Stan and I hadn't eaten since breakfast. We found a Cuban restaurant and ordered black beans and rice and small glasses of wine. As we sat at the little square table, I realized that I was slowly beginning to get a picture of my mother. She was seventeen or eighteen and she was pregnant—no, not just pregnant: pregnant with me. I wanted more than ever to bring her out of the shadows, to see her and talk to her.

When we got outside the restaurant, Stan said: "You'd better ask Uncle Abe what he knows."

I said: "I can't. He still doesn't know I'm looking."

I had to be realistic, Stan said. "He's nearly eighty, and when he goes there will be nobody. Don't wait and then say to yourself, Why didn't I do it?"

Stan knew Uncle Abe well, for we had kept in touch all through the years. In my closet, in a cardboard box, I still kept one of the roses from the birthday cake he'd bought me the year I had whooping cough. "But it will hurt him terribly when he knows I've been searching," I said.

"Florence," said Stan patiently, "he loves you."

Now my back was against the wall. Only the week before, my son had told me he was going to be married. He had been two and a half when I'd started my search. When, in his teens, I had told him I was adopted, he had been curious, but not upset. Now the problem troubled him too. "Mom," he had said, "don't we have any *blood* relations we can invite to the wedding? Jean's family will all be there."

Stan was right. I phoned Uncle Abe from a corner drugstore and told him we were in Brooklyn and would like to take him out

to dinner. He said that was a wonderful idea. "Uncle Abe," I said, "there's something I have to ask you. It's terribly important."

"Whatever I can help you with, it's yours," he said.

Uncle Abe's hair had long since turned silver white, and he moved more slowly, but that happy brightness was still in his eyes. We tried to persuade him to go to an elegant restaurant not far away, but it sounded too elaborate for him. He preferred a local place where he often ate with one of his cronies.

During dinner, I told him we had driven out to Bushwick Avenue, to the building I knew we'd all once lived in. He smiled, remembering. Then I told him of the images I'd had, and how familiar it had all seemed.

"How old was I when we lived there?" I asked.

He thought for a moment and then said: "You were about a year and a half when we moved."

"That's unbelievable!" said Stan.

Uncle Abe told me we'd had a corner apartment that was filled with sunlight. He told me how, when my mother had to go upstairs, nuns from the convent across the street would rock me in the wicker carriage he had bought for me. He told me that I'd often crawl to my grandmother and untie the laces of her high black shoes. He smiled broadly. "She didn't like that."

We returned to Uncle Abe's two-and-a-half-room apartment and sat talking about this and that. I still hadn't been able to ask him, but finally my time ran out. I leaned toward him and said: "Uncle Abe, I have . . . something to say to you. . . ."

He nodded.

"I want you to understand," I said, "that this has nothing to do with the way I feel about you. I love you very much."

"What's bothering you, honey?" he asked.

I said: "It's my adoption. I never talked to you about it because I was . . . well, I was afraid that if you knew I wanted to find my real parents you'd think it was because I didn't love you."

He smiled slightly and said: "That's foolish. I know you love me. Why would I think that?" He leaned toward me and asked: "What do you want to know?"

"Uncle Abe, there are questions . . . so many questions, and

you're the only person who can give me any answers. I must find my parents, Uncle Abe. If you know anything . . ."

My voice trailed off and I searched his face.

He said: "All I remember is that your mother came to me one day and said she wanted to adopt a baby. 'Fine,' I told her. 'Whatever you need, let me know and I'll help you with it.' You see, I felt I was getting a baby too. But after that it became a vague, silent thing in the house. She never told me any details. Something was said about your real parents coming from Philadelphia, and that it had been an early marriage that didn't work out. That's all I know. I wish to God I could tell you more."

I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. I knew that if he could, he would have taken me by the hand and brought me directly to my mother and father. My foolish fears had proved groundless, and I was desperately sorry I hadn't come to him years earlier. Admittedly, there was nothing new in what he told me—but I left his apartment that night feeling clean and good inside. Now I had another person close to my heart with whom I could discuss the problem at any time. How stupid I've been, I thought, to forget that where real love exists there can be no resentment—and there should be no guilt.

THEY were terrible letdowns at the time, but it is amusing to think back now on some of the wild-goose chases I followed, some of the foolproof systems that—at the last moment—fooled me.

I reasoned that to find the Morris Cohen listed at the Kings Highway address all I had to do was go back to the 1932 telephone directory, the year that 1933-1934 edition of Polk's city directory was compiled. Then I would check the subsequent telephone directories until this Morris Cohen disappeared or moved to another address. With any luck, I'd be able to find a more recent address where the family had lived long enough to establish close relationships. One of their neighbors might be able to tell me where my grandparents were now or, if they were dead, where I could find my mother. I couldn't wait to test my theory.

In the microfilm room of the library, I ordered the film for the summer 1932 Brooklyn Telephone Directory—in those days

the directories came out several times a year. There *was* a Morris Cohen at the Kings Highway address. Now, I thought, all I have to do is trace the Cohens through ten or fifteen years and figure out where they moved.

I immediately took out the film for the winter 1932 directory. My Morris Cohen was not there! He couldn't appear only once and then disappear. Couldn't he have stayed at Kings Highway for at least one full year?

On a pad I wrote down the names of all the Morris Cohens who appeared in both telephone directories. There were three in the summer directory who were not in the winter edition. There were also three *new* Morris Cohens in the winter edition who were not in the summer edition.

Next I checked each Morris Cohen in the 1932 Polk's city directory against each one in the 1932 telephone directories. I checked the names of the wives in Polk's, and was able to account for every Morris Cohen in both directories. Clearly, if my Morris Cohen had remained in Brooklyn, but moved to another address, he now lived either on East Nineteenth Street or on Avenue J.

Morris Cohen on East Nineteenth Street in the winter telephone directory had moved there from Third Avenue (the wife's name in both cases was the same), which eliminated him as a possibility at the Avenue J address. Thus Morris Cohen newly located at Avenue J moved there either from Kings Highway *or* somewhere else. I checked telephone directories and Polk's for every other borough and found no Morris Cohen with a wife named Hannah.

Morris Cohen on Avenue J *had* to be my grandfather. I got out the film for every Brooklyn telephone directory from 1933 through 1970, and found that he had finally vanished from Avenue J in 1963—thirty-one years after moving to that address. That was only seven years ago. Surely there would be people living there now who would remember him.

I decided to play another hunch and check the city directory for a Zimmerman. I wanted very much to place the Laddens and the Zimmermans, or the Cohens and the Zimmermans, in one place at one time. If Zimmerman had served as a go-between in the adoption, he might well have known both families intimately.

Sure enough, in the 1933 Polk's city directory I found a Louis Zimmerman listed at the same Avenue J address where my Morris Cohen lived! Even better, this Louis Zimmerman was an attorney, with an office in Brooklyn. I quickly theorized that Cohen and Zimmerman were contemporaries, and Zimmerman might well have arranged the adoption for the Cohens. (Wax had been the attorney only for the Laddens.)

Several hours later, I learned that Zimmerman had dropped out of the book in 1964. I phoned his law firm and found he had died seven years earlier. I tracked down his widow, called her at once, and asked if she had lived at the Avenue J address and if she knew a Morris Cohen.

Mrs. Zimmerman said she had lived in the building for twenty-three years but that she couldn't remember anyone by that name. She told me that she knew the name Ladden. One of my adoptive cousins, it turned out, was her closest friend. Was she lying about not knowing a Morris Cohen? People had lied to me before, but I felt instinctively that Mrs. Zimmerman was *not* lying.

There was only one way of checking it out—to go to Avenue J. If Morris Cohen had a wife named Hannah and a daughter named Florence, there could be no doubt.

On Saturday I drove out to Avenue J. It took only an hour to find a man who knew Morris Cohen. Yes, he said, Morris Cohen had definitely moved in 1964. I pressed further. Did he know where Cohen was living now? Did Cohen have a daughter?

Yes, they were friends and had kept in touch. "Morris Cohen," the man said, "is now living in Tucson, Arizona, with his only child, Albert, and his wife, Bella."

The only salvageable bit of information from the entire episode was the phone number Mrs. Zimmerman had given me of my adoptive cousin. I could have gotten this elsewhere, but I doubt I would have thought of it. I hadn't seen her since I was a child.

My cousin confirmed a suspicion I'd had since I first saw my birth certificate. My adoptive parents had been Orthodox and would have regarded it as a sin to name a child after a living relative. My mother had told me I was named for my dead paternal grandmother, whose name had been Florence. Until that

moment, I had assumed it was an accident that my natural mother's name was also Florence. Now my cousin assured me positively that Grandmother Ladden had been named Sarah.

So my adoptive mother had known the names of my real father and mother. She must have deliberately named me Florence, thinking that once she did my natural mother *would* somehow be dead and could never return to claim me. I realized how desperately possessive she had been.

On Friday evening, when I returned from work, an envelope from the Bureau of Records and Statistics was waiting for me. Inside was my mother's birth certificate. This gave her still more substance. My grandfather's first name was listed as Moishe instead of Morris, but I'd long realized that this assimilative change might have occurred. My grandmother's maiden name was again listed as Sweik. My mother's place of birth was shown as 80 Morris Avenue, Brooklyn; she had obviously been born at home.

Stan said an address sixty years old was really scraping the bottom of the barrel, but on Saturday, May 30, we drove to Morris Avenue. The area was in a state of total collapse, the streets littered with garbage, the dreary houses boarded up. I tried to see it as the clean, neat post-Victorian neighborhood it had once been. Perhaps my mother had played on these streets.

I walked slowly down the block: 74, 76, 78—and then 82. Between 78 and 82 there was nothing but a huge hole! I stared at the excavation that had once been 80 Morris Avenue and burst out laughing. This time I had really gone back to my roots.

THE first week in June was extremely busy for me. At Lincoln Center the Promenade concerts were in full swing, and several nights I had to work late. I kept the door open while I worked, so I could listen to the music. It was soothing and enabled me to think more clearly.

What hadn't I done? I hadn't checked the Kings Highway area for voting registration. What about schools my mother might have attended? Were criminal records worth checking? The Department of Motor Vehicles for driver-registration information? Death certificates? At least one of my grandparents might have died.



By the end of that week I felt exhausted. On Thursday night I had great trouble falling asleep, and when I did I dreamed that I had found my mother. In the dream I came to an old brick building and climbed the wooden stairs to the second floor. A door opened at my knock, and a smallish woman in black appeared. When I said: "I'm looking for my mother," she answered in a quiet monotone: "Your mother died yesterday. You're one day too late."

I closed my eyes and held on to the frame of the door. "No, not yesterday, not after all . . ."

In the morning I woke late and rushed to work, disturbed by the memory of my dream. She's not dead, I told myself. I know she's not. I wanted to find her *that* day, before it was too late.

When Mr. Brooks called and said he'd received my parents' marriage certificate from Philadelphia, I threw on my coat and ran to his office. My hands trembled as I took the certificate from him: this was the first time I'd seen my parents' signatures.

The names and dates leaped off the page. February 28 was the date of the marriage. I had been born in May of that year. Again I had a visual image of my mother. I saw a small, dark-haired girl—as I had been—with the bobbed hair of the Prohibition years. She was very young, very pregnant, and very desperate. My heart broke for her. She had lied about her birthday: on the license she was twenty-one but I remembered that the date on her birth certificate would make her only seventeen. Her mother's name was given as Hannah Sweik Cohen.

I went to a restaurant for a long-overdue breakfast and sat staring at my parents' marriage license. I had a real mother and father! I was no longer an orphan.

My father's place of residence was listed as Philadelphia. I couldn't quite put Philadelphia and New York together. Was it possible that the Cohen family in New York was no relation to me?

The marriage certificate also gave my paternal grandparents' names--Jacob and Irene; and my grandfather's occupation—designer. I assumed he had designed clothes. Although I had never studied designing, it had always come naturally to me. There were street addresses for both my parents, and I decided to go to Philadelphia the next day, a Saturday, to check these out.

That night I got out all the documents I had acquired. The one name that assured me that all these papers referred to one family was that of my maternal grandmother—Hannah *Sweik* Cohen.

As we drove to Philadelphia, I began to wonder, for the first time, whether my parents had remarried and whether I had any half brothers or half sisters. Mostly I thought of my father. The marriage certificate had been my first concrete evidence of him.

We drove to my mother's address on Walnut Street, but no one remembered my mother, my father, or any of my grandparents. At the Chestnut Street address where my father had lived, we thought the break had come. The woman who answered the door said she had owned, and lived in, the building for forty-four years. Eagerly I asked her about Frederick Fisher and Florence Cohen Fisher, saying they had lived in one of her apartments during the late winter of 1928. She said she had a perfect memory for such things; they definitely had not lived there at any time.

Phantom Cohens, phantom Fishers. Another wild-goose chase.

Part Three: *Somebody's Child*

6

On June 26, 1970, I saw my mother for the first time. No more need I hear the question, "Why do you want to know?" On that day I *knew* why I had searched, and my life was changed forever.

Now, as I think back on the three weeks that preceded that event, they seem to press inescapably toward the day. But at the time I did not know until the last moments how close I was.

The old out-of-town telephone directories in the New York Public Library Annex on Forty-third Street and Eleventh Avenue are yellowed with age and falling apart. On Monday, June 8, during my lunch hour, I searched in the 1928 Philadelphia telephone book and found no Fishers on Chestnut Street. But I did find a Morris Cohen at the Walnut Street address. This positively confirmed that my mother had lived with her parents, for at least a short time, in Philadelphia; she must have returned to New York at the time of my birth.

I had already reasoned that one or both of my grandparents had died; otherwise they would be close to ninety. In the library there were annual death-summary books, listing all persons who had died that year in New York City, with date of death, borough in which death occurred, death-certificate number, and age.

The ages of my maternal grandparents had been listed on my mother's birth certificate. Now Stan drew up a series of charts showing their approximate ages in subsequent years; this would enable me to tell at a glance whether a particular Morris or Moishe Cohen or Hannah Sweik Cohen could be one of my grandparents. He also drew up charts for my parents.

Early on Saturday, June 13, I went to the New York Public Library. I decided to check back from 1967, the date of the latest death-summary book, to 1933, the last date I knew my grandparents were definitely alive, looking for Florence Cohen, Frederick Fisher, Florence Fisher, Morris or Moishe Cohen, and Hannah Sweik Cohen. Each time I found one of those names I would check the age of death against my chart.

As I progressed, I realized that of all the hopes I'd had over all my years of searching this was the best; the death certificate would list next of kin. But as I bent over those ledgers, I became more and more uncomfortable. Here I was hoping that one of these names was my real grandmother or grandfather, for only if they were dead could I find, through next of kin, my natural parents.

I found a Hannah Cohen who had died in 1967, age seventy-nine. There was a Moishe who had died in 1961, also aged seventy-nine, and another Moishe who had died in 1957, at seventy-five. All three were in Brooklyn. In the other boroughs I found twelve more. There was a Florence Cohen who had died in 1948 at the age of thirty-six. The age was not quite right, and I dreaded to think my nightmare had been prophetic and that my mother was dead—but I listed the name anyway.

On Wednesday, June 24, my destination was the Bureau of Records and Statistics, to ask for the death certificates of the three Cohens who had died in Brooklyn. I had a strong feeling that something was about to break.

Over the years I had learned not to be tentative—not to say "May I" but "I would like to" see. I told the first clerk I saw that I'd like to have copies of the three death certificates.

"Sorry, you'll have to write for them," he said.

"I'm only in town for a few days; I *must* have them now."

He said it was against regulations.

I pleaded with him for ten minutes. I hated to beg and lie, and finally the tears came. I took out a handkerchief.

He threw up his hands and said: "All right. You'd get them anyway. I'm not going to stand in your way."

He took my paper, with its three names and death dates, and asked another clerk to get him the books for 1967, 1961, and 1957. While we sat waiting, I told him of my twenty-year search, never mentioning that I was adopted.

The 1961 ledger came up first. By this time the clerk was so interested that he took the book himself and turned the pages for me, while I looked on. "Aaaah," he said, his finger stopping at one of the names. "Moishe Cohen. Here it is!"

I read the date of death, the address of the deceased, the cemetery, the date of burial, the funeral home, the place of death, and then the name of the informant: Hannah Cohen.

"That's right, isn't it?" the clerk said excitedly.

"Yes," I said quietly. "That must be my grandfather."

When the 1967 ledger came up a few moments later, the clerk again ruffled through the pages. After a while he cried: "Yes! Hannah Cohen!"

The address was different, but only a few houses away on the same block. She could have moved. The same funeral home was listed, and they were buried in the same cemetery. There was the name of the old-age home in which she had died. Then I saw the clincher: the maiden name of the decedent was Zweick.

The clerk said: "This is it! Z-w-e-i-c-k. Sweik. Zweick is the Russian. You've found it!" There was a big smile on his face.

I could only nod, too filled with mixed emotions to answer.

As I looked at the page there was a new name, and it puzzled me. The next of kin was listed as Norman Cone. This was followed by the word "son," and then an address. My mother's birth

certificate had listed her as the only living child; through a check of other directories I had been able to determine that she had a younger sister. This must be a younger brother who had changed his name from Cohen to Cone. But did that mean he was the only survivor? What had happened to my mother? And her sister?

I felt tense and overexcited, and I decided to walk it off. Mr. Brooks's office was nearby. I wanted to tell him. I could sit there, sip a glass of cold water, and collect my thoughts.

It was four thirty when I finally arrived at the office. I put photostats of both death certificates on his desk and slumped back into one of his huge leather chairs.

"These *have* to be your grandparents," he said excitedly. "Sweik, Zweick. Your grandmother's maiden name."

He examined the photostats again, then realized that a friend of his was a director of the old-age home mentioned on my grandmother's death certificate. He phoned his friend, who authorized him to call the records office. Mr. Brooks did so, and asked to be told the next of kin of Hannah Zweick—or Sweik—Cohen.

"Yes? Yes?" he said a few minutes later. "Florence . . . Okun?"

I gasped.

"And you can't give me anything else today?" he asked. "Not an address? Not the names of the other children?" He looked at me and shook his head. "All right," he said. "Yes, thanks very much."

He turned to me and said: "Florence Okun."

"Yes," I said softly.

"We'll get the rest tomorrow, Florence," he said, looking at his watch. "I've got to catch a train."

But I had dreamed of being one day late and finding my mother dead. I had searched too long to wait another day.

When Mr. Brooks left, I dialed the home myself, told the woman I was Mr. Brooks's secretary, and that we needed information about the Cohens urgently. She protested, but I pressed her.

The phone was silent for a moment. Then I heard: "Exactly what information do you need?"

She gave me Florence Okun's address in Dobbs Ferry, in Westchester County, north of New York City, and her home and business phone numbers. There could be no doubt whatsoever. Morris

and Hannah Sweik Cohen were my grandparents; they had lived on Kings Highway in 1933. And Florence Okun was my mother.

I've found her, I thought. Waves of relief, exultation, and disbelief flooded through me.

Stan met me, and we had dinner in an Italian restaurant. It was a glorious evening. I ate scampi and drank four glasses of Valpolicella. The waiter asked me why we were celebrating. When I told him I'd found my mother, he said: "Where you loos-a her?"

Then I said to Stan: "I've got to go out there tonight." I wouldn't disturb her, but I had to see the house my mother lived in.

It was two a.m. by the time we found the dimly lit street in Dobbs Ferry. Tree-shaded and lined with comfortable one-family houses, it looked as if it would have been a pleasant neighborhood to grow up in. There were no lights on in the house. Stan stopped and I leaned out of the car to see the name on the mailbox.

It was F. X. McDowell.

"Wait," Stan said. "I'll ask those kids." There were two teen-agers necking in a parked car across the street. Stan walked over to them. I watched him tap on the window, saw two heads suddenly jerk up, and then the window roll down. Then he walked back slowly. He looked at me for a moment with trepidation; then, cautiously, he said: "The Okuns moved away a year ago."

"Oh, no!" I shouted, and began to laugh uncontrollably.

"Florence, are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right." This was not a case of the phantom Cohens. They had lived here and now they lived someplace else. "Where can she go in one year," I said, "that I can't find her now?"

I DIALED the number quickly and asked: "May I speak to Mrs. Okun, please?"

It had been nearly four a.m. when we'd arrived home, but I had hardly slept at all. Although I was physically and emotionally exhausted, my mind spun with expectations. The first thing I did when I got to the office the next morning was to check the Westchester County telephone directories for 1967, 1968, 1969, and 1970. There was a William B. Okun listed, and at the same address a Marsha Okun. There was a Robert L. Okun at another address.

They were in all three earlier books, although not in the current directory. But I still had my mother's office phone number, and this was the number I'd dialed.

"I'm sorry," a woman told me, "Mrs. Okun doesn't work here anymore."

"I'm just in from California for a couple of days," I said. "Mrs. Okun is a cousin of mine, and I'm terribly distressed because I just found out she moved from Dobbs Ferry a year ago. Can you possibly tell me where she moved?"

"Mrs. Okun moved to Manhattan," the woman said.

I asked: "Does she have a daughter named Marsha and a son named Robert?"

"Why, yes."

I now knew, for the first time, that I had a half sister and a half brother. "Does she have any other children?" I asked.

"No. None that I know of."

When I hung up, I got out the current Manhattan directory. Okun was a great name. Smith, Jones, or Cohen would have finished me! The Okun family were all listed. My mother had done exactly what I'd do. She had raised her children in the suburbs and then retired to Manhattan—perhaps to be near the theater and opera. I dialed her home number but there was no answer. Perhaps she had another job.

I dialed Robert's number. Maybe he or his wife, if he had one, could give me another number to call.

When a woman answered the phone, I said: "My name is Audrey Orenstein. I think I'm a cousin of your husband's."

I told her an involved story I'd fabricated, concerning "my" grandmother and Hannah Cohen. I told her I was looking for Hannah Sweik Cohen's daughter.

"Oh, that's my husband's mother," she said.

"What I'd really like to do," I went on, "is see your mother-in-law and be able to report back to my grandmother that I was able to make contact with her family. I tried her at home and—"

"Oh, she's at work now."

"Would you give me the number, please?"

"Of course," my sister-in-law said.

My mother worked in the executive office of a large department store. I dialed each digit slowly. You're calling your mother, I thought. In another minute you'll hear her voice. I coughed nervously and fought to keep the tears out of my voice.

When the store operator answered, I said: "May I speak to Mrs. Okun, please?"

Then I heard, "Executive office. Mrs. Okun."

Her voice sounded—or did I imagine it?—like mine. And she enunciated her words in the same way.

I said: "You don't know me, Mrs. Okun, but I believe we're cousins." I heard my voice, out of the turmoil and near hysteria inside me, emerge cool and calm. I could feel myself beginning to shake all over. "My name is Audrey Orenstein," I said.

The woman said: "We don't have any Orensteins in the family."

"That's my married name," I said. My strength grew while I talked, but I knew I'd have to maintain absolute control if I was to carry this off. "I'm from California and my grandmother came into the country between 1900 and 1910. She came with her cousin." I told her that my grandmother and her cousin were separated soon after they got to America, and that my grandmother had gone out West. "She's very old and infirm now," I said, "but she still thinks nostalgically of Russia and of coming over on the boat with her cousin." I paused for a moment. "Her cousin's name was Hannah Sweik."

"That was my mother!"

I felt horrible. My first contact with my mother was a lie. But it would have been monstrous, after all these years, to announce over the phone: "I'm your daughter."

She was saying: "Oh, I can't tell you how excited I am. I must call a cousin of mine—and yours, too, I guess—who keeps a family tree. I *must* see you. How long will you be here?"

"Just a few days. I'm here with my husband."

She said: "Let's set a time right now."

I said: "Would you meet me for lunch tomorrow?"

"No," she said, "you must have dinner with us."

"It would be too much trouble for you," I said softly. I couldn't

possibly go to her house. If her husband and family didn't know, it could blow her life apart to tell her in front of them.

"Look," she said. "I can't talk now because there are people in the office. Is there someplace I can call you later?"

"I'm staying with relations of my husband," I said, and gave her my home phone number.

"Good," she said. "I'll call you as soon as I get home tonight and we'll arrange a time for you to come to dinner. I can't wait to meet you, Audrey."

When she hung up, I ran to the Xerox room and broke down completely. Tears poured down my cheeks and I sobbed uncontrollably against the machine.

I HAD always been angry when friends warned me that at the end of my search I'd probably find someone reprehensible. The unwed mother who gives a child up for adoption is, everyone assumes, a slut. When I was a teen-ager, my adoptive parents had watched every move I made, convinced that otherwise I'd wind up as my mother had. Like mother, like daughter.

I had told my friends: "So what? I only want to find my parents; that's the important thing. They're part of the truth of who I am—and that's what I'm looking for." Still, I had a firm belief that I would not find my mother in the gutter. And now I had spoken to a perfectly lovely woman who had sounded warm and generous, outgoing and effervescent.

All that afternoon I kept asking myself: Did I really talk to my mother? Yes, I had. I had done it. I had beaten the Greens and the Waxes and the sealed records. I had beaten the system. They had sealed the records, but they couldn't seal my mind.

Intermittently I cried and laughed and thought of what I would have to do next. I cried on the subway going home. I cried in the butcher shop, and the butcher, an old friend, said: "What's the matter? Are you all right?"

"I spoke to my mother," I told him.

He knew about my search. "She found her mother!" he said excitedly to a customer, and the stranger, seeing my joy, put her arms around me and held me tight.

The phone was ringing when I entered my apartment a half hour later. I dropped my packages and ran to answer it.

"Hello, is this Audrey?"

I knew the voice immediately. "Yes," I said calmly.

"You know, I've just called my cousin," she said, "and it's so strange. She keeps a fantastic account of the family's activities, but she's never heard of you or your family."

I said: "I never knew there was family in New York, either." I was holding the phone with both hands to keep the receiver from knocking against my teeth.

We laughed and chatted, and it was all very lighthearted and happy. I heard myself say: "I'd love to know about your family."

"Oh, I have a wonderful family," she told me. She spoke glowingly about her son and daughter, about their achievements. Her son had majored in music and now was a performer. "Our house was always filled with children and music." She went on to tell me about her daughter's academic honors and her son's plans for the future. "So you see," she continued, "I have two lovely children."

It was almost too much to bear. It was all so unreal. I wanted to say: "I'm your daughter. You have *three* children."

Now she was telling me about her sister, and about her brother—my uncle, Norman Cone. I felt sick deceiving her. She was being so open with me, so unsuspecting. But I have a right to this information, I thought. This is my family.

I was once given sodium pentothal for an operation. When I came out of it, I heard everything through a mist. I felt that way now. Was I dreaming it all? Me, chatting on to my mother as if we were old friends. All the while I kept looking out the window, watching the bright orange crest of the sun slip down slowly behind the Palisades. Would she vanish too? Was she real?

I asked: "Why did you move to New York last year? Didn't you like the suburbs?"

"Not really," she said. "I want to be near the theater and the concert halls. I love Manhattan."

"Have you always lived in this area?" I asked. "Your accent isn't New York."

She paused. "Yes," she said hesitantly. "Except for a time when

I was in my teens. We lived in . . . Philadelphia for a while. Look, I love having people for dinner, and I wouldn't think of letting you leave town without coming over. We can try to straighten out the family tree. Let's make it tomorrow definitely."

"Well, we only have a few days . . . so why don't I simply meet you for lunch?"

"No, I'd really like to make it for dinner, when we'll have time to sit down for several hours and not be rushed."

I *had* to see her alone. Maybe she was a dead ringer for me and everyone would see it.

"Please say you'll come," she said.

I couldn't push her any further. "Thank you," I said. "Of course I'll come." But I would not go to her house. "Why don't I meet you at your office and go home with you?"

She seemed puzzled by this, but she finally agreed. I promised to meet her the next day at five thirty.

We had been talking for more than an hour. After I hung up I sat watching the last Monet-like moments of the sunset. The fantasy of the evening turned into a long night, crowded with tossing and nightmares.

7

How was I going to tell her? All the next day, Friday, June 26, that question kept tormenting me. Could I say it just like that? "I'm your daughter."

Eleven thirty-five. It had been raining since early morning—a thick thunder-and-lightning summer storm. The streets were in high flood, my office windowpanes streamed with rain.

I wanted to change before I met my mother at five thirty, so I had brought a valise containing a second pair of shoes, extra stockings, and a pale sea-green dress I had designed for myself. It went well, I thought, with the handbag I'd also made. I had gotten up early and set my hair myself.

Why wouldn't the storm stop? Twice I went into the ladies' room to see if the rain had mussed my hair too badly. I kept looking in my valise to make sure I had brought everything I needed.

By noon I knew that my nerves would not hold. Over and over I rehearsed the words I'd have to say: "I'm your daughter."

Two fifteen. I wondered what she'd look like, and what she'd say when I told her.

I looked at my watch again. Two twenty-two. If I don't get all the answers, I thought, at least I'll see her.

Three thirty-five. What could I say in the time it took to walk the block from her office to her home? How can I tell her in the street, in the rush-hour crowd, in the pouring rain?

As it grew closer to five thirty, the weather grew worse. The rain came down in heavy sheets. I felt a deep depression settling in me. Had she ever thought of me? Did she regret having given me up? I knew she hadn't tried to find me, for one of my Ladden relatives—all of whom knew I was searching—would surely have told me. Did she want to forget—had she virtually forgotten—that she gave birth to a daughter forty years earlier?

At four twenty I went into the ladies' room to change my dress. When I came out, my friends in the office gathered around me, very concerned. One said my eyes were swollen. I looked into a pocket mirror and saw that they were like little red balloons. I'd brought some boric-acid solution with me, and after I'd washed my eyes for a few moments, the swelling went down a bit. But I was shaking, I'd gone ghostly pale, and I could hardly stand. Everyone hunted throughout the offices until someone found some tranquilizers. I took one, and soon the shaking stopped.

I left the office at four forty-five. My friends came to the door with me and assured me my mother would be glad to see me. I could only say thank you in a husky voice and then hurry out.

I hailed a cab; I was afraid that despite my raincoat and plastic rain bonnet, I'd look a mess by the time I saw her. In the cab I told the driver: "Please hurry. But please be careful." Nothing must happen to me before I saw my mother. I took out my mirror. My eyes were still red and a little swollen. I put on dark glasses.

It was good that I'd left early. We were in the midst of rush-hour traffic, and for long minutes we'd stay in one place, listening to the incessant honking, watching the windshield wipers snap back and forth. I had to talk to someone or I'd burst. "I'm go-

ing to see my mother," I said, "for the first time in my life."

The driver, a burly man in a peaked cap, turned around, looked at me, and said: "Waddaya mean yer gonna see yer mother for the first time?"

When I had told him, he said: "That's some story, lady. I've heard lotsa stories, but that's *some* story."

In a few more minutes we were there. As I handed the driver his money, he said: "Good luck, honey."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll need it."

With the rain bonnet and dark glasses obscuring my face, I walked into the store and asked where the executive offices were. Upstairs I asked the way to Mrs. Okun's office.

"Through that door," a clerk said.

I pushed the door and thought: *This is it.*

THE first thing I saw were my mother's legs: they were plump. She was bending over some files and as I saw her I thought, That's what I'm going to look like in seventeen years. She was small, like me, but heavier—as I'd be if I didn't learn to live on lettuce. Then she turned around.

I have never known nor will I ever feel again such a wave of happiness. My mother no longer an image conjured up by my longing, a shadow haunting my sleep. She was real.

In an instant I took in every feature of her face. Only her mouth was different: otherwise we might have been sisters. Even the shape of her face and the animation in her eyes were the same as mine. She was not pretty or glamorous—nor am I. But I loved the way she looked. The only shock was seeing that she wasn't seventeen years old, as I had been imagining her.

Suddenly the anguish of years fell away. I had grown so used to the heaviness in my heart that when it left me I felt light and free.

She said: "Are you Audrey?"

I said: "Yes, I am."

"Would you mind waiting a moment, dear?" she asked.

A moment? I had an impulse to laugh hysterically. I'd waited years, waited in courts and lawyers' offices, waited while strangers searched their memories, waited for names to appear in dry old

telephone directories. Yes, Mother, I thought, I can wait a moment longer.

"Of course I don't mind waiting," I said.

I sat in the outer office and soon she came, carrying her umbrella and saying: "I'm ready."

I'm not, I thought. I had an intense desire to touch her.

In the elevator we made idle conversation. I looked at her and smiled and I could scarcely hear anything she said. I wanted to take off my dark glasses but did not. Obviously I couldn't tell her here, in a crowded elevator. But where? We'd have only a block before we reached her house. I had to find a way to stop. I had to get her into a seat somewhere.

Outside, the storm had grown heavier. She opened her umbrella, I opened mine. We had gone half a block when I took a quick breath and said: "I wonder if we could go somewhere for coffee before we go to your house."

She gave me a curious look. "We could have it at home."

I said: "There's something I'd like to ask you about both our families; so could we just have a few moments together—before we go to your house? Please?"

She looked at me strangely again and said: "Of course. If you want to. There's a coffee shop down the block."

We walked toward it, saying nothing now. We closed our umbrellas, went in, and found a table in the back. We sat down and she looked at me expectantly.

I still had on my dark glasses and hooded rain bonnet, and I peered at her from under them while I tried desperately to say something to her. A full minute went by.

"I don't know how . . . to begin," I said at last, and choked up. Oh, God, I thought, don't let me break down and cry.

She kept looking at me but said nothing. I *couldn't* tell her, the words would not come. I fumbled in my purse and took out my birth certificate. Then I took out the Order of Adoption, her marriage certificate, her birth certificate, and the death certificates of Morton Cohen and Hannah Sweik Cohen. One by one I handed them to her.

Neither of us said a word. Her face, looking briefly at the birth



certificate and then toward me, was blank. I removed my rain bonnet and my dark glasses. I looked constantly at her face. It was a mask.

Casually, she flipped through the papers, glancing at each one. Then she put them all down. A stranger would have shown more interest in reading them. Mother *knew* the contents.

I said: "I want you to know that I don't have any desire to intrude in your life, but—"

She looked directly at me and said: "What is this?"

I said quietly: "I've spent twenty years searching for you." I looked at her. The person who had been so delighted to take a cousin home to dinner had vanished. Her expression had become cool, veiled. "It should be obvious to you that I don't want to intrude in your life—or I would have gone right to your home. But there are questions that only two people in the world can answer—you and my father."

Without a moment's hesitation she said: "I believe you're mistaken. I'm not the person you're looking for."

Had she really said that?

She lit a cigarette and began to smoke rapidly. The waitress was standing impatiently by our table. We both said: "Coffee."

I felt ridiculous. I told her there were many things in my nature that I could in no way attribute to my environment. "This above all led me to search for my father—and for you."

"I've always felt it was a person's environment that made them what they are," she said.

I said nothing, but she saw I was not going to drop it. "Why is this so important to you?" she asked. "It's not the mother who bears you but the one who brings you up who counts." *That* from my *mother*. Did she really believe it? Or was it a bitter, though necessary, rationalization for what she had done?

"The truth," I said softly, "that's all I want from you. I don't want to be included in your life. That would be nice, but if it's not possible, it's not possible; I have a good life. But I must have the answers. I want to know who my father was. I want to know why I was given up for adoption. I want to know who and what you are. I want to know what my grandparents were."

I was speaking in a low, soft tone. I did not want to badger her like this. "I have a child," I said, "and I have a responsibility to pass this information on to him, just as you have to pass it on to me. I must have these answers—for my peace of mind."

She said: "I wish I could help you but I can't."

She lit another cigarette and began to ask me questions—who I was, what I'd done with my life. If she weren't my mother, why would she be interested? I looked at her face, *my* face, and saw only a studied calm.

I decided to answer her questions. I told her that I lived in New York, not California. I told her I'd always had a passion for reading, for making things, for music and the arts and the theater. I told her that I'd been taking music lessons and that I sang in a semiprofessional chorus.

For a moment I thought—or did I imagine it?—that a glimmer came into her eyes, that they seemed less masked and cool. Was it pride? Did she recognize in my enthusiasms something of her own? She kept lighting one cigarette with the other.

She casually picked up the documents again and said: "I couldn't be the person you're looking for; I was born in 1920." She riffled them until she came to Hannah Cohen's death certificate. "My mother's name was Zweik," she said, "but without the *c*. I'm so sorry I can't help you."

I took a deep breath. I had wanted to spare her. All I wanted was the truth, and I was getting lies again—and now from her. You asked to know about my life, I thought. All right. I'm going to tell you. And blow by blow, without embellishment, I told her what my life had been as an adopted child.

"And still," I said when I had finished, "that is not the reason I looked. I don't resent *you* because of it. I looked because there was a closed door I had to open. Only you have the key."

I had no more strength, nothing else to say.

She had listened to every word; she had looked at the documents; she had watched me constantly, glancing down only now and then at her hands—chubby little hands, like mine. I can be as cool as that when I have to. But as the Italians say, "Blood calls blood." Could I deny my own child?

She put out her cigarette, stood up, and said for the third time: "I'm sorry, I'm not the person you're looking for." She never said: "I'm not your mother."

I saw, as she put down money for the coffee we hadn't touched, that her hands were shaking. I had wanted to get to the check first, but I couldn't move my arms. I thought, Let your mother buy you a cup of coffee, Florence. Then she knocked over the ashtray, did not turn back, and hurried out.

I sat for half an hour unable to move—unable, really, to think.

Finally I tried to compose myself. Stan had arranged to be at the house of a friend not three blocks from my mother's office, where I could reach him if he were needed. He'd be waiting now, and he'd be worried. As I got up to leave I noticed the fallen ashtray and bent down to pick it up. On the floor, next to it, was something black. She had dropped her wallet.

THE first thing I said to my husband was: "She said, 'I'm not the person you're looking for.'" Then I took her wallet out of my purse and placed it on the table. "She dropped it."

He asked: "Have you looked in it?"

"No," I said. I have always respected other people's privacy, but I knew I had to look in this wallet. Maybe she's not your mother, I thought. She did say she was born in a different year.

I opened the wallet and saw her driver's license. It gave the correct day and year of her birth—the same as those on her birth certificate—and there was a signature. I took the documents out of my purse. Her signature, forty years later, was nearly identical with that on the marriage certificate.

I now had several choices. I could decide that my mother and I need never see each other again. Or I might press the issue—challenge her as I had challenged others in the past; I could call her, write her letters. Or, since she knew where to find me, I could wait in the hope that she would come to me. She must have had her painful reasons for refusing to admit the truth.

That night I made my decision. I would give her two months, until the end of the summer, to get in touch with me. I could afford to give her that long, but I would not lose one half of my life and come up with a zero. If she would not tell me the things she knew I wanted to know, there were other people who would. She looks like me, I thought, but if she can walk away from this without telling me, she isn't anything like me.

There was still the wallet. In it I had found photographs of my grandparents, and of my half brother and half sister. I looked at the young man and young woman for a long time. They did not resemble my mother in any way. I was her image.

On Monday morning I typed out a letter, with no salutation:

To deny your identity could, in effect, send me on a search that would last my entire life, for a nonexistent Florence Cohen. There was no doubt in my mind before we met. Seeing and speaking with you merely confirmed what the documents prove.

If you know yourself, then you must know that I am neither capable of causing you harm nor of disrupting your present life.

Many years ago I read a poem, the lines of which have been engraved in my soul:

> *Oh! why does the wind blow upon me so wild?*
> *Is it because I am nobody's child?*

I signed it simply: "Florence."

I wrapped the letter and the wallet carefully, and addressed the package to Florence Okun at her office. I called a messenger, described my mother to him, and said: "Be sure you give this to her and to nobody else. In fact, call me when you get there. Describe her to me, and then I'll tell you whether or not to give her the package."

An hour later he called me and described my mother. I told him he could give it to her.

WHEN I got to the office on Tuesday morning, there was a message that someone had called me but left no name. Soon the phone rang. I said hello and heard: "I can't talk now." The voice was thin and choked up. "Can I . . . see you?"

I recognized her voice at once. We arranged to meet at six o'clock at the top of the Beekman Tower. It would be quiet there.

I left the office as soon as I could, went home, showered, and lay down for a long rest. I got up about four, put on fresh clothes, and made myself up carefully. As I drove downtown in a taxi, I realized I was not nearly so nervous as I had been before our first meeting. There had been a readiness to talk in her voice.

I took the elevator to the top of the building. There is an outdoor patio surrounding the lounge, and I decided to take one of the tables there, where we could look out over the city and talk quietly. I sat where I would see my mother when she entered.

She was no more than a few minutes late, but apologized, saying the traffic had delayed her. She had on a simple print dress, and every hair was carefully in place. I knew she must have gone home to change as I had. She was freshly made up—and very, very nervous. She sat down and tried to speak. Her mask was gone, but she had poise enough to contain herself. I was proud of her. She faltered. "I . . . I just don't know . . . where to begin," she said. "I . . . don't know *how* to begin."

The waitress came over and we gave our orders for drinks.

My mother did not take her eyes off me. "When I saw the birth certificate," she said hesitantly, "I felt like a . . . like a building had caved in on me."

"I know," I said softly.

"You see, I had buried it for all these years. It had been a very painful experience in my life." Her voice was low but firm now. Her lips opened in a small smile as she told me she'd never lost anything in her life. Dropping her wallet, she implied, may have been the only way she could tell me. "Forgive me for saying what I did," she said. "I knew you *knew*. I . . . I didn't know what to say."

"You did beautifully," I said. I saw her hand reach out across the table toward me—and then pull back and rest on the tablecloth.

Then she began to tell me what I had always wanted to know.

She had been about fourteen when her family moved to Philadelphia, to the Walnut Street address. In those days, she told me, there was much less formal dating, but everyone would gather at someone's house for an evening of talking, singing, and playing the piano. My mother played well, so the gatherings were often at her house. In the summer before I was born, one of the boys who began to come to the gatherings was Fred Fisher.

"He was handsome," she said. "He was on his own, working as a law clerk—and I fell in love as one does only at sixteen." She paused. "Your father had auburn hair, a face full of freckles and laughing blue-gray eyes." (My son's eyes, I thought.) "We were close in age, but he seemed much older. He was sophisticated and charming, and had a beautiful voice. He was my first love—and you were a child of that love."

She went on. "Your grandfather's business failed and we had to

return to New York. Fred and I thought we were seeing each other for the last time. That was why things happened as they did."

Mother became less nervous as she talked. I listened intently, each word helping to fill the void I had lived with for so long. As more details came out, I realized that she might never have confided in anyone before—and that talking to me might be her first release from the prison of her silence.

By mid-autumn she had realized she was pregnant. She and my father were now separated by a hundred miles, and as the months went on she became more and more desperate. My mother was proud, and she tried to resolve her situation without telling my father. But by January she had no choice.

They were married at a simple wedding in Philadelphia three months before I was born. My mother had just turned seventeen; my father was eighteen. They rented a room at the Chestnut Street address listed on their marriage certificate. The landlady's memory simply had been faulty.

My maternal grandparents knew nothing of the wedding until it was over. When they were told, my grandmother became hysterical; my father was not the son-in-law she had envisioned.

As the weeks moved on, the pressures grew. My father lost his job and could not find another. The little cash they'd been given as wedding presents was exhausted, and my mother's father came to Philadelphia to take her back to New York. My father followed her, but my grandmother threw him out. She called my mother vile names and kept shouting: "You're no child of mine!"

My mother went on, painfully now. "So a friend of my mother's at 695 Broadway took me in, and for the last weeks nobody saw me. I supported myself by doing housework for them."

When her time came, the woman with whom she lived took her to the hospital. My grandparents refused to visit her, and she was actually told I had been born dead. For four days she believed it, while my grandmother and her friend tried to give me away without going through legal channels. Only when they were told that the mother's signature was needed on the adoption papers did they finally tell her I was alive.

Dr. Green and my grandmother's friend told Mother there was

a childless couple who wanted to adopt a baby. My grandmother sent a message that if my mother gave me up for adoption she could come home; otherwise they would place her in a home for wayward girls after they had had the marriage annulled.

"I was seventeen, alone, and terribly frightened," she said, finally putting her hand across the table to touch mine.

She had agreed to the adoption and was never permitted to see me. My adoptive parents took me home from the hospital. She had never actually seen me until four days ago.

We were no longer strangers now, as she filled in these details of my heritage. No, she hadn't named me and had no idea where the name Anna had come from. Perhaps some nurse in the hospital, feeling Baby Fisher was too anonymous, had named me out of kindness.

I told my mother about Dr. Green and she nodded. "He knew that I'd had to get married," she said. "He must have thought that I was very free. 'Good Jewish girls' of sixteen or seventeen didn't get pregnant in those days. When I went to his office for my postpartum examination," she continued, "he . . . he tried . . . I had to run out of there. . . . It was horrible."

Now I knew the reason for his intense shock at seeing me. I was in my early twenties then, and looked very much as my mother had at seventeen. He had blanched when he saw me; suddenly I *was* my mother—and she had rejected him. His savage outburst had been his revenge.

We had planned to spend only an hour together, but the time evaporated as she told me about her childhood. Her father had loved the arts, and frequently took her to the ballet, the opera, the theater; but her mother seemed never to have liked her. Right up to her death, my grandmother had continued to taunt my mother about what she had done. I felt a tremendous sense of triumph over Hannah Sweik Cohen, who was the cause of all that happened—and whose name had led me to this moment.

It had taken my mother ten years to get back into life after I was born, and when she remarried, she could tell her new husband only that she had once been married and that the marriage had been annulled. She could not bring herself to say: "I gave my

baby away," so she told him that her child had been born dead.

"Don't hate me," she said to me.

"How could I ever hate you?" I asked. "You're my mother."

She said that perhaps now she could tell her husband and her children. Perhaps . . . but she would have to wait, think it out.

Now and again she would reach across the table to touch my hand as she talked. What great compassion and overwhelming love I had for her. Reluctantly, I reminded her that her family might be getting worried about her. But she said she could stay a little longer without arousing alarm.

We moved off onto other subjects, how we as little girls had both read and loved Dumas and Hugo, *Anna Karenina* and *Wuthering Heights;* how we both loved music. When she saw the handbag I carried, she said: "You know, I make bags."

I said: "I made this one—and I make hats too."

Softly she said: "Yes, so do I." She told me that she often worked at night when she couldn't sleep.

We were together for more than three hours. The sun had set, and I could see only its crimson glow in the west. We had tried to cram a lifetime into one evening, but now it was growing dark and my mother had to leave. We got up together and she moved around the table to take my arm. We walked toward the elevator together, arm in arm, unable to resist touching each other, as we had reached out all evening to touch each other's mind and heart. In the elevator, as we stood together silently, I thought with a bittersweet pang how sad it was that we should be meeting this late, that we had missed a lifetime of love.

It was dark outside, and we walked slowly to the corner, holding hands tightly, walking close. I realized, suddenly, that I wanted to prolong the evening and yet I didn't; I didn't know how much longer I would be able to stand it. I had been prepared to talk to her for an hour, but not for us to feel so comfortable with each other, to find so much in common.

Before she got into a taxi, my mother put her arms around me and held me very close for several long moments. "Let's not say good-by," she said softly. Then I watched her cab drive off up First Avenue until it was out of sight.

Whether we could build a relationship wasn't important at the moment. The questions, the secrets, the mysteries that had gnawed at me since childhood were gone. I was now linked to a past, and I felt more strength for the future. That great void inside me was filled. The evening had been like looking in a mirror and seeing a reflection for the first time.

8

THE next few months were good ones. I was no longer working, and I was enjoying my peace of mind. I was convinced that I would complete my quest by finding my father. I planned to search for him in the spring.

My mother had not gotten in touch with me again after our evening together at the Beekman Tower. Periodically, as summer passed into fall, I had thought of her. Her birthday came and went; I was tempted to make her something pretty but decided against it. I felt she must take the initiative.

One evening in early December, the phone rang. I knew at once who it was. "You've been sending me messages," she said. "I couldn't sleep last night."

From then on, my mother began to phone regularly, during her lunch hour or after work. We chatted on a wide variety of subjects, neither dwelling on nor avoiding the topic of adoption. We were becoming friends. She told me she was proud of what I had done with my life, and it saddened her to think she'd had no part in it. "I look in the mirror every morning and see your face," she said. "I want to tell the world, 'This is my daughter,' and I'm ashamed of myself: I don't have the courage." She still had not told her family.

One day we met for lunch at a Chinese restaurant near her office, ordered shrimp with lobster sauce simultaneously, and laughed. I was wearing a turquoise dress I had designed myself. She admired it and remarked that turquoise was one of her favorite colors. She had brought old family pictures to show me. She told me of my great-grandparents in Russia—bits and pieces of information that delighted me.

She said: "It's ironic that the one person with whom I can share

my innermost feelings is the child I gave away." She paused for a moment and took out a cigarette. "Florence," she said, tension coming into her voice, "I know now that I will never be able to tell the family. They'll turn from me."

It wasn't telling her husband she feared. She was sure he would love me simply because I was a part of her. It was my brother and sister—she just could not bring herself to gamble on their reaction. They had never been told of her early marriage.

As we left the restaurant, I put my hand on the door to open it for her. Her voice breaking, she said: "Can I just hold you . . . for a minute?" She put her arms around me and held me very tight.

When I arrived home that evening, the phone was ringing. It was my mother, asking me if I had gotten home all right. "I just want you to know," she said, "that I think you're beautiful, and that I love you very much."

IN ALL the years of my search, I had never thought of adoption in relation to anyone but myself. I was unaware that other adoptees were engaged in similar pursuits.

One evening in January, the winter after I had found my mother, I was seated at the piano attempting to master Debussy (Debussy was winning). Stan turned on the TV and suddenly I heard the words "adoption" and "save Baby Lenore." The picture of a baby flashed on the screen and I listened avidly to an editorial decrying the "unfortunate fact" that a natural mother was fighting to get her baby back from its adoptive parents.*

* In June of 1970 Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas DeMartino of Brooklyn, New York, started proceedings to adopt a baby girl named Lenore whose natural mother, Olga Scarpetta, had signed a legal surrender of the baby. When she changed her mind and brought suit to recover Lenore, New York State's highest tribunal ruled in her favor, and the United States Supreme Court rejected the DeMartino's appeal. Meanwhile the DeMartinos, with the child, had taken up residence in Miami, and when Florida courts awarded them custody of Lenore they started adoption proceedings under Florida law. The Supreme Court refused Miss Scarpetta's bid to contest the Florida decision, and there, at this writing, the matter rests. [The Editors.]

So profoundly was I affected by the Baby Lenore case that during the following days I bought every newspaper on the stands and listened to all the news broadcasts. The adoptive parents were being quoted and applauded everywhere. Nowhere did I see or hear a word of compassion for the natural mother. I was mystified: the trial judge had decided that the child's best interests would be served by returning her to her natural mother, whom he had found to be fit, competent, and able to raise her baby, but the prospective adoptive parents—it turned out that the child was not yet legally adopted—refused to give the child back.

The case haunted me. Like a homing pigeon, I returned to the library and read several books on the problems of adoption. I began to realize that though I had viewed adoption emotionally and privately, I had reached many of the same conclusions these writers had, but they brought the entire picture into focus for me.

I learned that in all but three of the United States the adopted adult of any age is denied the right to see the true records of his birth and adoption. And in only one of those three states are the records fully open upon request.

I knew that the natural mother's right to privacy—which enables her to make a new life, free from fear of future harassment or even blackmail—is one of the three principles upon which the sealed records are defended. The other two are the child's right to a secure childhood, and the right of the adoptive parents to build a family life without fear that the natural mother may return to claim her child. But what about that child, the innocent silent party in a legal action that decided *forever* what he would be entitled to know about his heredity? Did the natural mother's right to privacy include the right to condemn her child to a lifetime of silence? It was a hard question.

Amid the heat generated by the Baby Lenore case, assemblymen in the New York State legislature at Albany began crying, "We don't want any more Baby Lenores," and introduced legislation that would give a natural mother only thirty days after she signed the surrender papers in which to alter her decision. The existing law gave her six months. That seemed fair—to the adoptive parents, to the natural mother, and to the child. Any girl who

has gone through the trauma of an unwished-for pregnancy needs time to consider all the consequences of her decision.

I had always viewed myself as apolitical, but one March afternoon, when the "thirty-day surrender" bill was coming up for a vote, I found myself on a bus, bound for Albany to argue against it with trained politicians, most of whom had already made up their minds. The bill was as good as passed before I got there, and my pleading did little good. I returned to New York determined to find out whether other adopted people felt as I did.

I PLACED this ad in *The New York Times:* "Adult who was an adopted child desires contact with other adoptees to exchange views on adoptive situation and for mutual assistance in search for natural parents."

The morning after my ad appeared, my mother called and said: "You placed that ad in the paper yesterday, didn't you?"

I said: "Yes, I did."

"I knew as soon as I read it," she said. I could tell it had disturbed her. "Florence, you're opening a Pandora's box."

"It's got to be opened," I said. "It's time we faced the problems."

I could feel a terrible decision pressing on me. My mother wanted the best of both worlds: a back-door relationship with me and privacy from the rest of the world. I wanted to have a relationship with her, but open and free. And I was afraid I'd have to choose between my own mother and what was becoming in my mind "the adoption cause."

The following week—it was on a Sunday early in April—I arranged a meeting of the few adoptees I had been able to reach in the New York area. All were looking for their parents, and they were terribly concerned about two things: that they would hurt their adoptive parents, and that their natural mothers would not want to see them. We decided to form an organization, and after giving serious thought to what we should call it, I worked out Adoptees Liberty Movement Association, or ALMA: *alma* is the Spanish word for soul. We would accept no minors, and our concern would be with making adoption records available to all adult adoptees.

Only five people came to that first meeting, but as word got around, attendance at our meetings grew larger and larger. I had placed ads in several other newspapers and soon found myself inundated by letters from all parts of the country—not only from adoptees; many were from mothers seeking contact with their own adopted children. People from as far away as California and Alaska sent in small dues payments along with their good wishes and pleas for help.

I decided early that it would be wrong to search for other adoptees' parents for them. If someone really wants to look—and not everybody does—it's healthier if they do so themselves. By now I have seen many who sought and found and grew confident in the process. Recently, however, we at ALMA have begun to keep a complete card file of all who are looking—adoptees, natural parents, and adoptive parents who are interested in helping their children locate their natural parents.*

I had been totally unprepared for the thousands of letters that poured in. Some, from adoptive parents, were adverse. "They should have left you in the gutter," one read. A woman who signed herself "A Loving Adopted Mother" wrote: "We have enough trouble in this world without you stirring up more. You make me sick." But I also received some heartening letters from adoptive parents who recognized that my object was *more* love and understanding, not less.

"I am a psychologist interested primarily in child development and child behavior disorders," one man wrote. "Also, I happen to be an adoptive parent. . . . I happen to agree wholeheartedly with your organization's ideas. My conviction is, as a father, and from what I know as a child psychologist, that it is very important for adopted children to be able to gain a feeling of their biological identities."

I was particularly interested in learning that so many adopted people who deeply loved their adoptive parents still wanted to meet their natural parents. The letter which follows is typical.

*Full details of the organization may be obtained from ALMA, P.O. Box 154, Washington Bridge Station, New York, N.Y. 10033.

> The most wonderful thing of all is that I was really loved—and I knew it. On top of all that, my parents loved each other very much. . . . Now with all that love in my family, one might ask, "Why would she even care about her natural mother?" My answer is this—I want to see if I resemble her in any way, and I'm terribly curious to know the whys and wherefores concerning my being put up for adoption. I would *never* disrupt her life.

SIMPLE curiosity? Yes, it is that. But it is also a tremendous need to discover one's own heritage—good or bad, but one's own.

Some months after ALMA got under way my mother called again. I was scheduled to go on a national television talk show and she was calling to beg me not to use my real maiden name. No decision was harder for me to make. I wanted to protect my mother, but I told her this would negate everything I stood for.

"I can't"—her voice began to crack—"I can't bear the thought . . . of anyone knowing."

I knew now that the choice really was hers. I knew I couldn't give up ALMA. "Mother, tell the family the truth," I told her as gently as I could. "Not for me but for you. You told me once that my grandmother is reaching out from the grave to hurt you. As long as you live a lie then she still has power over you. The moment you tell the truth she can't touch you anymore."

She was silent. "Mother?" I said.

"Forgive me," she said. "I don't want to interfere in your life."

"I know. You're not rejecting me. You're rejecting . . . life and truth. Please understand. I must use my maiden name. That's who I really am. My adoptive name is not me, and my married name has nothing to do with this. I love you," I added.

And then we said good-by. We have never met again.

9

IT WAS May, and spring created an atmosphere filled with promise. The time had come to resume the search for my father.

My mother had told me that a year after my birth she had accidentally run into my paternal grandfather in New York. He

had seemed genuinely concerned about me and my welfare, so I decided to start with him. I searched through the city directories but found no trace of him.

I went to Philadelphia and checked through forty years of city records. I even checked marriages from the time of my parents' separation through 1970: if my father was the man my mother had said he was, his chances of remarrying were pretty good! And, of course, unable to resist ringing doorbells, I went to Chestnut Street. Nothing.

Nobody vanishes. A redheaded man should be easy to find. Everybody leaves a trace—everybody, it seemed, but Frederick Fisher with *his* red hair and laughing blue-gray eyes.

My mother had told me she thought my father's family originally came from a New Jersey town beginning with a V, probably Vineland, and that he had four or five brothers. I phoned a funeral director in Vineland named Victor Rone, and asked if he would check his burial records. I told him I was coming to Vineland that weekend. He offered to call some Fishers and place an ad in the community paper.

On Thursday, May 6, I returned to New York from Philadelphia. Stan and I were having dinner, discussing my next strategy, when the phone rang. Stan answered. "Yes, she's here, just a moment . . ." and his face went pale as he handed me the receiver.

"This is Ben Fisher," the voice said. "From Vineland, New Jersey. I'm your uncle. Your father is living in California and—"

Over, over, it's all over. I dropped the phone and ran from the room sobbing.

While I composed myself, I could hear Stan carrying on a quiet conversation with my uncle. Then I went back into the kitchen, took the receiver again, and listened, unbelieving, as Uncle Ben told me that Victor Rone had begun to call all the twenty-one Fishers in Vineland. He had also placed the ad. One of my many cousins had seen it.

"I don't know what my brother thinks or feels," my uncle said. "He's been an actor and stunt man in Hollywood since you were born. We rarely see each other. But you have a right to find him. So take his number and call him now."

"You mean *just call him*?"

"Sure. He's a big boy. He can take it. So don't waste time talking to me. And, Florence, you have a family now—after you've spoken to your dad I'll tell you all about them."

FOR a long time I just stared at the number I had written down. Then I dialed the operator, asked to speak person-to-person with Frederick Fisher, and waited.

I heard my father's voice. It was just as my mother had remembered it—deep, well modulated, and one thing more: happy and full of fun. "Hi, who is this?" he said.

"Hi," I echoed. "Are you sitting down?"

"No. Should I be?"

"Yes," I said, pausing for only a second. "This is your daughter."

"Oh, my God," he shouted. "This is the most wonderful moment of my life!"

I was prepared for rejection, acceptance, denial—anything but my father's incredible joy. When we began to talk, it wasn't a conversation, but two buoyant monologues. We asked and answered questions at the same time—without a trace of awkwardness.

"All these years," he said, "I used to look at children in the street and think, Somewhere I have a daughter, too. I always loved you and I always wanted you. I used to lie awake at night and wonder: Who is she? Where is she? What is she like? Does she ever think of me?"

He asked about my adoptive parents and for a moment I hesitated. "It's all right," he said. "You can tell me. Whatever you have in your heart I want you to tell me, always. And whatever I feel, I'll tell you. I want there to be absolute truth between us. You can't build a relationship on anything else."

We talked for more than three hours (the phone company, which may have been listening in, sympathetically dropped a digit and charged only three dollars). Finally, when we both knew we should get off, we didn't say good-by. He said: "Let's not lose each other, ever again. I'll write to you. And we'll see each other soon." And then—was it possible a voice could contain so much tenderness?—"Good night, *my daughter*."

THE NEXT MORNING I called my son and asked: "Honey, how would you like a grandfather for a wedding present?"

He was at his fiancée's house, and I could hear him shouting to the whole family: "My mother found her father! She found my grandfather!"

When I told him that his grandfather was a stunt man in Hollywood, he cried in delight: "You mean he jumps off cliffs?"

On Saturday morning I received another phone call. "I'm your uncle Adolph," the voice said. "I live just across the George Washington Bridge, and I must have driven past your house a thousand times. Every day, in fact, on my way to work."

He told me that only two years ago my father had come to his house for dinner. "He was working on a film. I picked him up at his hotel and took him home. He sat in my kitchen, put his head in his hands, and said to the family: 'I have a child somewhere and I'm never going to find her.' He had gone to the courts, tried to find your mother's family, put blind ads in the newspapers."

All along I had thought I was alone, that nobody cared. Now to find *he* had been looking for *me* was shattering. And my father had had nothing to go on, not even my name.

Uncle Adolph went on: "Our stepmother had received a phone call, oh, maybe twenty years ago, in Philadelphia. I don't know much about it, but your dad said he'd been looking seriously ever since then."

I wondered if that could have been the woman with the southern accent I'd once talked to—an eternity ago—who had asked me why I wanted to speak to Frederick Fisher. I invited my uncle to dinner the following Thursday.

On Monday I found a huge, fat manila envelope from California, marked Special Delivery Airmail, stuffed into our mailbox. I tore it open, and dozens of photographs tumbled all over the floor of the lobby. There were photographs of my father scuba diving, with actors he'd doubled for, jumping out of burning cars. He was handsome. I loved his face—it was beautifully weather-beaten. I loved him. My father.

I sat down on the steps, the photographs all around me, and read my father's first letter to me.

Friday, May 7, 1971
7:20 a.m.

My dear Florence:

Needless to say, not one wink of sleep did I get last night, but then who would after a telephone get-together as we had.

It seems incredible that forty-three years have gone by as rapidly as they have. What a wonderful thing it would be if youngsters would have foresight—a lot of things certainly wouldn't happen in our lives. . . .

I'm sure you have the tenacity of a Fisher in searching. Just where, when, what year and how did you really start? Back in the fifties, I started a search of my own, when I was in Washington, D.C., and received a call from my father telling me of a strange request made to his wife. Were you the one and how come you didn't contact me at that time?

This whole thing is just too tremendous for me at this writing, but more questions and answers will come.

Did you say your mother really is still alive, and if so, where, and do you see her at all?

Now it's going to be a period of adjustment within myself. Realizing there is really someone who is a part of you is very exciting. . . .

With best regards to your husband, and bless you for your perseverance.

Love,
Fred

P.S. I'm a grandfather, too—right?

I wrote back that night, enclosing photos of myself, my son, and my husband. My birthday was only a few weeks off, and I added: "This year you are my birthday present to me."

His second letter came a few days later:

My dear Flo:

I received your special delivery with all those goodies. . . . I still don't quite believe this all has come about as it has.

In one of your pictures you bear a striking resemblance to your mother. Your mother, as I remember her, was not a large girl then. Have the years treated her kindly?

You know the word "dad" is a little startling at my age but if

one repeats it a few times to oneself, it's not too hard to take. . . . As I gazed at the photos—especially the one of you and Glenn—I was startled to see a lot of myself in your face, and your hair was dark auburn. . . .

Yes, quite a birthday present. I'm real—and to my dying day, thanks many times over. You've been just great.

Love,
Dad

THAT week my uncles checked in one by one, to see how I was or just to say hello. Thursday evening came, and with it Uncle Adolph, hidden behind a profusion of daffodils and irises—and a card that read "Welcome to the Fisher Clan."

It took Uncle Ben just ten days from that first phone call to arrange a gathering of the "clan." Each of Dad's four younger brothers—one was no longer living—had several children. On Sunday, May 16, Uncle Adolph and his two younger daughters, Maryanne and Jean, drove in to New York to take us down to Vineland.

Uncle Ben and his wife were waiting at their door. He put his arms around me and kissed me, and I felt as though I had been with them forever. Victor Rone was also there. When I thanked him for what he had done, he clasped my hand and said simply: "Thank *you*, for giving me the opportunity to help."

Uncle Ben took us all out to dinner and we had great fun together.

Father's Day came and I sent Dad a box of cigars with pink bands that read "It's a girl." He passed them out to everyone he met.

Glenn's wedding was approaching, and I remembered his asking whether we had any blood relations to invite. In the midst of those hectic days of planning, I'd smile at the thought of all the Fishers who would be there. I had hoped that Dad would fly in from California, but he had fallen from a ladder a week earlier and hit his head on concrete. I was terribly worried about him.

My son's wedding, held in Philadelphia, was the happiest night of my life. All the Fishers came, and Uncle Abe, too. They loved each other and I loved them all, each in a different way. The human heart is not small—it can always make room for one more loved



person. When we were in the car on the way back home, Uncle Abe said to me: "You have a beautiful family, Florence."

I leaned over and kissed him. "I've always had a beautiful family, Uncle Abe. Since the day I was born I've had you."

DAD had recovered and he and I had been joyously planning my trip to Hollywood. All the way to Los Angeles I wavered between eager anticipation and the sober thought that I did not know the man who was waiting for me. I had spoken to him, I had seen his photographs, we had written to each other almost daily—but, logically, how could I possibly *know* him?

When I left the plane and walked into the California sunshine, his was the face I saw first. He rushed through the crowd, kissed me, and held me tightly in his arms.

I memorized every line of his face. His eyes were dark blue and gray, and spotted with little yellow flecks—exactly like my son's. This was not the empty face of a stranger. I was whole at last.

Toward the end of my visit we went to Disneyland together. What a wonderful, impossible day that was, sitting in the first row on the Caribbean cruise, getting pelted with waves until we were two hysterically laughing drowned rats, watching pirates bury gold and burn towns with such animation you'd have thought they were real. Is all this really happening to me? I thought. Is it me—and is it really him? We stuffed ourselves with ice cream and popcorn and cotton candy and frozen bananas. Only when he saw a father with a little girl would he grow quiet for a moment, and squeeze my hand as if I were a child, and then we'd skip off, smiling, laughing, talking without pause.

Being with him, I knew I could never have accepted less in my life—not the mystery, not the "facts" of him on a sheet of paper. Not anything but the man himself.

Epilogue

I AM NOT by nature an activist. I prefer making a handbag to making a speech. Friends sometimes ask me why I continue my involvement with the problem of adoption after having found both

my parents. I cannot do otherwise. Not while there are sealed records and sealed minds.

Each day I receive dozens of letters. Another article on adoption appears, is syndicated perhaps, and my desk is again flooded. One woman tells me her child is dying, and the doctors think it may be a hereditary disease. She goes to the adoption agency—and learns no more than that she had "two parents."

Another woman writes: "I am now seventy-eight years old and my only wish is to contact the child I gave up for adoption before I pass on. Can you help me?"

Some days I can't bear to open the letters. I let them sit on my desk, sixty or seventy of them, for two or three days. I look at the piles that grow larger every day, from every section of the country. And then I think of all the years I was alone, how I looked for just one other person who would understand.

We pass this way but once. If we hedge against reality, if we do not pursue our dreams, we make a mockery of life and know but half of what we are. So I begin to open the letters, each a bit of another human being's soul.

The Right To Know

The question of an adoptee's right to information about his or her origins is a difficult and controversial one, as The Search for Anna Fisher *shows. To find out why such information is withheld by law, the editors asked a former family court judge of New York State, the Honorable Justine Wise Polier, to present the case from the other side.*

Why do most states keep adoption records sealed? What are the rights of adopted children, and of natural and adoptive parents? By its raising of these complex questions, *The Search for Anna Fisher* presents a challenge. It does not resolve the problems.

With the growing use of the Pill and of abortion, there has been a sharp decrease in the number of babies surrendered for adoption. Most babies now being surrendered were born out of wedlock to teen-age

girls. If these girls wish to keep their babies, as more and more do, they find far greater acceptance of themselves and their babies than was the case in former years. However, if a girl decides to give up her baby, believing that adoption by a loving family will be better both for the child and for herself, should she not be entitled to the assurance that no one will later track her down and reenter her life against her will?

Should not adoptive parents, likewise, be assured that they can build a home with their child without threat of intrusion by a second set of parents at a future time? Such a threat would make difficult a full investment of themselves in the relationship. To some families it would make adoption too fearsome to contemplate.

Finally, one must question how "the right to know" would affect the adopted child as he grew up. Would he be subjected to nagging doubts as to whom he belonged and about his duty to seek out his natural parents? Would this "right" lead to a conflict of loyalties, or offer an escape hatch when parent-child problems arose, as they do in every home?

There are also basic social problems raised by the concept of the right to know. At the present time, tens of thousands of children across the country are living out their young lives as boarders in foster homes and institutions. Their parents refuse to surrender them for adoption, but are unable or unwilling to have them return and be part of their natural families. Moved from place to place, these children can form no deep emotional ties with anyone lest the person they have come to love should disappear. In this area, the law continues to place the rights of the natural parents above those of the innocent child.

There is no doubt that the question of sealed adoption records requires most careful and objective reexamination. But there is no single or simple answer. It would be tragic if Florence Fisher's moving personal story of her search should lead to obstructing rather than opening the way to adoptive homes for children who need them, especially those who are now in the limbo of protracted foster care.



MRS. STARR LIVES ALONE

She thought she was coming home to an empty house. Instead she was walking into a nightmare



A CONDENSATION OF THE BOOK BY

JON GODDEN

Illustrated by John Falter

Though the house was large and remote from the village, Margaret Starr had never felt nervous about living alone. What was there to be afraid of in the peaceful English countryside?

Yet looking back on her return from London that day, several things had struck her as odd. The used ashtray in the living room, for instance, and signs that someone had taken a bath. There had been sounds, too, as if . . .

Not even the realization that the house had another occupant prepared Mrs. Starr for the bizarre sequence of events that followed. As one discovery led to another, her comfortable, ordered life became a terrifying ordeal which, it dawned on her finally, could only have one end.

1

IT WAS a fine evening in May when the station taxi drove her to the gate of the house. The upper windows, under the old slate roof, caught the light of the setting sun, while downstairs, in the shadow of the beech hedges, every pane was black, lifeless, unwelcoming.

Although she had been away for only a few days, Meg looked at the house as if she no longer recognized it. "Your telephone is ringing, Mrs. Starr," the driver told her, and as she roused herself to pay him, he smiled and added, "You never know—better hurry."

He was the same pleasant-looking young man who had driven her and Rosa to the station, and she smiled back and thanked him. Then, as his car bumped away down the lane, she walked slowly up the path in the warm spring evening, noticing that the lawn was newly mowed and that her tulips had come out. She refused to hurry toward the shrill insistent summons that was coming from the hall. Rosa Maitland must be high over the Atlantic by now, and there was no one left to ring her up—no one, that is, who mattered. But the ringing went on, and it became impossible to ignore it. Meg moved on up the steps, put down her suitcase, and felt in her bag for her key. As the door swung open, she ran across the hall and picked up the receiver.

"Hullo?" she said. "Oh, Mrs. Dawlish. . . . You've been ringing up all afternoon? But I wrote here, yesterday, to tell you not to wait for me, as I was catching the later train. . . . *What* did you say? You couldn't get in this morning? . . . *Bolted?* It can't have been. . . ."

Swinging around, Meg stared at the open door. "But Mrs. Dawlish, you must have been mistaken. I had no trouble getting in."

The flat, nerve-rasping voice sounded offended. "Of course I believe you," Meg said quickly. "I suppose I might have given you the wrong key. No, no, I wouldn't dream of it, tomorrow morning will do. . . . The groceries? I'll bring them in. . . . Now, don't worry. I'll have some supper and go straight to bed. I am a bit tired."

There was a *ting* as Meg replaced the receiver; then, all at once, she was aware of another sound, so faint she wondered if it were imagination: a whisper, a thread of music unwinding down the stairs. She went and looked up at the landing, and at once the music stopped.

Meg hesitated, frowning, and then put her hand up to smooth the creases away. Rosa had told her that her frowning had become a habit in the year since her husband, Jocelyn, had died, which was a pity, for just as her tall figure was still slim, her forehead under the short silvery hair was amazingly unlined for a woman of her age.

She decided that the sound, if she had heard it at all, must have drifted across the orchard from Felix Palmer's television set. Felix was her nearest neighbor. Except for the farm at the end of the lane, there was no other house nearer than the village, over a mile away.

On the chest at the foot of the stairs was a pile of letters, which must have come while Mrs. Dawlish was still here, setting the house in order before departing too for a few days' holiday. It was odd that there should have been no mail lying on the doormat. Meg leafed through the letters and came upon the note she had written to Mrs. Dawlish. If she were not so tired she would know why that envelope, stamped with the hotel's crest and addressed in her own neat hand, made her feel uneasy. Her puzzled frown cleared as she saw the blue airmail letter with the South African stamp. It was from her elder son, Michael, and would be something to look forward to while she was accustoming herself once again to the empty house.

Putting the letters down, she collected her suitcase from the front step and closed the door. At once darkness descended on the hall, and she shivered. The house seemed shut in on itself, sullen, hostile. The mahogany furniture and Jocelyn's prints stared coldly at her. She started as the tall corner clock struck the first note of eight.

"I'm tired, that's all," she said aloud and looked around guiltily,

although there was no one to hear her. This evening she felt something more than the loneliness she had experienced since Jocelyn had died. If only Rosa were in her house on the village green, a few words with her on the telephone would dispel the gloom. Rosa had suggested she get a cat. "You wanted a cat once, didn't you, Meg? It was only Jocelyn that stopped you." Cats were unpredictable, often aloof, but a kitten might have shown that it was glad to see her—something alive to come back to, something young in the house.

She picked up her bag and her suitcase and went upstairs. She could not wait any longer to get out of the clothes she had worn in London. She would put on slacks, a loose sweater, flat-heeled slippers, then have a good stiff whisky instead of her usual sherry, and perhaps she would feel her calm self again.

At first glance her bedroom was as she had left it five days ago. Then she noticed that the room reeked with scent. Her younger son, Philip, had sent her some for Christmas, and although she had never used it, she kept the handsome glass bottle on her dressing table. In the morning Mrs. Dawlish would no doubt explain how she came to upset it. The bottle was still half full, but the stopper had not been replaced. Moreover, the dressing table was covered with a film of powder, and two used tissues were still in the wastepaper basket. Mrs. Dawlish had evidently not cleaned the house very thoroughly. No wonder she had sounded agitated on the telephone.

Obviously she had made no attempt to clean Meg's bathroom. The tub showed a scummy ring; the towels hung askew, and the scuffed bath mat was still on the floor with a sprinkling of bath crystals. Meg could not believe that she had left the place in such a state. Could Mrs. Dawlish, tempted by the rose-geranium bath salts, have had a bath while she, Meg, was safely away? Surely not.

After she had changed, Meg went downstairs, frowning. The house was too big for one person, she knew. Never had she been so conscious of the three unused bedrooms and of the attic above. Rosa had asked her if she were nervous living here alone, but Meg was not a nervous woman. "That's one blessing anyway," she said aloud again, as she walked along the passage to the kitchen and the furnace room, turning on lights as she went. She switched on the central heating—it would be some time before the house warmed up—and went to the back door.

It was bolted, as it should have been. A box of groceries was on the step, along with only one pint of milk instead of the usual two. Meg had never known her milkman to run short before.

Crossing the old red tiles, Meg put the box down on the china cabinet. On the big, gleaming new electric stove Mrs. Dawlish had left a used saucepan, Meg saw with surprise—and was the oven really giving out a faint glow of heat? The switch was off—no, that was impossible. She was staring down at the stove when someone knocked at the back door.

Felix Palmer stood on the step, looking back down the path toward the orchard. There was no sign of the two wriggling dachshunds that were usually at his heels, but one of his many cats sat a few yards away. Felix was wearing a beret pulled down over his sandy hair, and his fawn raincoat that always looked as if it had just come back from the cleaner's. His finicky neatness, here in this country place, had always irritated Meg.

He turned around, looked briefly into Meg's face, and then his small brown eyes flickered away. Rosa had protested when Meg had called him shifty, assuring her that he was only desperately shy, especially with women. Rosa and her husband had been kind to him when he first arrived from Kenya to build his wooden bungalow on the land beyond the Starrs' orchard. But Jocelyn had taken one of his violent dislikes to the poor man, even before their quarrel over the boundary hedge, and had forbidden Meg to ask him to the house. Never before had he come to knock on her door, and when Meg said, "Oh—good evening, Major Palmer," she knew that she sounded surprised.

At once he hunched his shoulders defensively and mumbled that Rosa Maitland had asked him to keep an eye on her.

"But I've only just got back from seeing her off!" Meg said, and added hastily, "It's very kind of you."

"Not at all . . . neighbors and all that . . . lonely spot," was all she heard him say as he kept his head turned away from her.

Smiling and trying to put him at his ease, Meg said, "Darling Rosa, she does fuss, doesn't she?"

Looking directly at her for the first time, he said, "Mrs. Maitland is a good friend, and what she says goes with me. So here I am." He did not add, Like it or not, but his tone implied it.

For a moment Meg was annoyed; then she relented. "Won't you come in? I was about to give myself a drink. Do have one with me."

Unexpectedly, he did not even hesitate, but pulled his beret off and followed her down the passage to the hall. "Would you like to leave your coat here?" she asked as she picked up her letters; perhaps he would take them as a hint and go away before long.

The sitting room smelled of stale cigarette smoke. Propping the letters against her gold carriage clock on the mantelpiece, where he could not fail to see them, Meg hurried to open the windows. "Extraordinary how the smell of smoke lingers," she said. "Rosa was here the evening before we went to London—she smokes like a chimney, as you know."

The ashtray by the sofa where Rosa had sat had not been emptied, and yet Mrs. Dawlish had obviously tried to tidy the room: the flowers had been taken away and the fire had been relaid. Meg tipped the butts into the fireplace and saw Felix smile. He took the box of matches from her. "Let me do that." As he bent to light the fire he said, "I don't smoke either. It's the one thing I find a bit trying about Rosa."

Meg warmed toward him. It had been kind of him to trouble himself about her. She took a tray and glasses from the cupboard below the bookshelves and opened the old mahogany wine cooler where Jocelyn had always kept their drink. "Whisky?" she asked, and then stood still, looking at the bottle in her hands. "That's odd. I could have sworn that I hadn't opened this bottle, but it's only half full."

"Are you sure?" He sounded unduly concerned. "Perhaps that woman who works for you—what's her name?"

"Mrs. Dawlish? Impossible!" she said.

"You never know these days." He looked like a sandy fox, its nose twitching on the scent, a false scent.

"I would believe more easily that I had drunk it myself in a fit of absentmindedness," Meg said as she poured two whiskies. She gave him his glass, pointed to the wing chair, and sank down on the sofa.

"It's very pleasant here," Felix said as, resting his glass on his knee, he looked around him. "I haven't seen this room for years, not since your husband and I had our—our little disagreement." He darted an anxious glance at her and, when she only smiled, went on. "A beautiful room, lovely things in it. But then I have always admired this house."

"Have you?" Meg said. "Do you know, I have never cared for it.

Jocelyn fell in love with it—it must be twenty years ago now—when we first came down here to stay with the Maitlands. I never had the heart to tell him that I would much rather have had something modern, light and airy, with no beams or latticed windows."

"But the house suits you so well." Felix sounded shocked.

Meg smiled again. "Ancient but well preserved? Is that what you mean?"

It was a shame to tease him. His face reddened. "Not at all. I meant—well, quiet, gentle, gracious. . . ."

"Very nicely put!" Meg laughed, then said, "I might have sold the place after my husband died if it hadn't been for Rosa. She has been lonely too since John died. And then Philip, my younger son, loves this house. I suppose he will live here one day."

She sighed and at once Felix said, "You're tired. I shouldn't have stayed—"

"Oh no—don't go, finish your drink, at least." Meg realized that it was a relief to have someone, even this odd little man, sitting opposite her. "It's just that I find London rather exhausting these days."

"Can't stand the place. Too many changes, too many people—and what people! Girls that look like boys, boys that look like girls, no telling them apart . . . no manners . . ."

"It's a difficult world these days. When we were young our elders thought much the same about us."

He snorted rudely. "That's nonsense. All young people are difficult, but this lot—violence, hooliganism—long-haired decadents, that's what they are."

"Surely it's not as bad as that," Meg protested. "Long hair's only a passing fashion—much more decorative, I think, than a crew cut!"

Felix passed his hand over his short hair and smiled, a rueful smile that made him look much younger. How old was he? Fifty-five, sixty—some years older than she was. "I'm old-fashioned," he said, "and I shouldn't get so worked up. Let's change the subject. Did you enjoy yourselves in London?"

"We did indeed. Theater, lunches, shopping—two elderly widows on the loose. Rosa said that it was just what she needed before setting off for a two months' stint of being a resident grandmother. Her daughter in Canada—"

"Is having yet another baby. How wrong!" His small brown eyes had a fanatical gleam. "Too many people!" he said.

"Well, you needn't glare at me like that," Meg said. "I have only two sons, and no grandchildren so far—I wish I had."

At once his manner changed and he said quietly, "What bad luck that both your sons work so far away—Singapore, isn't it?"

"Philip is in Singapore, only for a few years, I hope, but Michael has married and settled in South Africa."

Felix said with surprising gentleness, "You must often feel lonely. Perhaps you should have had a daughter."

"Perhaps I should. Jocelyn always wanted one, but I thought he and the boys were all I needed."

"What about a granddaughter? Someone to take an interest in, to look after. That's quite in the cards, isn't it?"

"I suppose so, but Philip isn't even married yet, and what use would a granddaughter in South Africa be to me?" Meg sat up, suddenly very tired, and looked across the hearthrug at him. She seldom said what she was thinking, as she did now. "This is rather an odd conversation, isn't it, Major Palmer, considering that we hardly know each other."

At once Felix put his glass down. "I've been talking too much," he said, "riding hobbyhorses, boring you—"

"Oh, I didn't mean that. Won't you have another drink?"

"No thanks. I'll leave you to read your letters in peace." He stood up. "You should keep a guard dog," he said suddenly. "An Alsatian would be best."

Startled, Meg drew back. "An Alsatian! They terrify me."

"Well, we're rather cut off down here, you know. Aren't you nervous sometimes?"

Meg stood up, raised her eyebrows, and said, "What could there be to be nervous of in this peaceful country place?"

"No place is as peaceful as it was," Felix said. "There's violence everywhere, and it's growing."

"I know, I know," she said impatiently. "Terrible things happen, but not to ordinary, harmless, everyday people."

"Have you forgotten our own post office and poor Mrs. Hobbs? The gang who tied her up was caught, but there are others. Don't you read the papers? Why, only the other day . . ."

Meg turned away, trying to close her mind to his voice. "Don't, please don't," she said. "It makes me sick."

Felix took no notice. He was talking about some horrible accident to a policeman. Meg put her hands over her ears. He was suddenly silent now, looking at her uneasily, shamefaced.

To give herself time to recover her usual calm, Meg picked up her glass and put it down with exaggerated care beside her letters. "Has anything else happened in the village?"

"No, no, of course not," he said. "But you think over what I said about a dog—and give me a ring if anything worries you, even if anything seems a bit odd. I'll be round at once. I keep a revolver handy."

"A revolver! That's rather drastic, isn't it?"

"Don't like to be without a gun," Felix said. "I was in Kenya all through the emergency, you know."

"But there is no Mau Mau here," she said gently.

"No?" he said. "Well, good night."

As Meg locked the door, she frowned and shook her head. She could not help feeling sorry for Felix. Obviously, after a soldier's life in India and then in Kenya, he could not reconcile himself to his dull existence in that bungalow—which, of course, explained the alarming nonsense he had talked. A revolver indeed!

The sitting room with its fire was comfortably reassuring. Meg sat down in the wing chair, the letters in her lap, and opened the one from Michael. When she had read it, she sat looking into the flames. Rather an uninteresting letter for him, about people and places Meg did not know; it made him seem farther away instead of bringing him nearer. She sighed and, looking through the pile of envelopes, came to her letter to Mrs. Dawlish. There was, of course, something wrong about this letter; in the morning, after a night's rest, she would realize what it was.

Standing up, she tore the envelope in two and put the pieces in the fire. It was nearly ten. She would open a can of soup—anything else was too much bother—then a hot bath and bed. She went down the passage and, after pausing to bolt the back door, into the kitchen.

She took a can of minestrone soup from her grocery order and heated it. The lone bottle of milk was still on the table; when Meg went to put it away, she saw that the refrigerator was shining and bare. Mrs.

Dawlish must have taken her literally when she had said to throw out all the leftovers; there was not even a scrap of butter or an egg left.

If only Felix Palmer had left her alone this evening, she would by now have shaken off her depression. His tirade against the young, his talk of violence and wickedness had upset her. She liked young people and felt sympathy for them. And all her life she had avoided hearing, seeing, even reading about anything unpleasant.

Now, as she picked up her spoon, she found that she was listening intently to nothing, because the house was silent. The hoot of an owl made her start, and her spoon rattled against the bowl.

As Meg put her empty bowl into the sink, she reminded herself that all the doors were locked, the sitting-room windows latched. Nothing could get in.

Having turned out the light, she went into the hall. "Give me a ring," Felix had said, "even if anything seems a bit odd." There had been several small oddnesses, most of which could be explained: the whisky, for instance, the milkman running short, the stove, her untidy bathroom. Anything else? The letters neatly arranged on the chest in the hall? Surely there was nothing odd about that—or was there?

She put her hand up to her head, which, she now realized, was aching. "The trouble with you, Margaret Starr," she said aloud, "is too big a whisky on an empty stomach," and leaving the lights on in the hall—something she had never done before—she went upstairs.

In the long corridor that led to her bedroom, her feet made no sound on the thick pile carpet. Here the ceiling was curved like a tunnel roof, which was perhaps why Meg felt a sudden wave of the claustrophobia that sometimes overcame her in confined spaces. Her bedroom, whose pink-shaded light she had left burning, seemed a warm sanctuary.

Meg hesitated, then, turning back down the corridor, opened each closed door in turn and switched on the light. The rooms, innocently empty, seemed to look back at her in astonishment. "Why not look in the closets?" she asked, jeering at herself. Back in her own room, she went to the windows to draw the curtains. She could see, far away among the trees, a light shining in Felix Palmer's bungalow. She wondered, as she undressed, what could have happened in the village that day. Rosa or no, Felix would never have come to see her if something had not happened to disturb him.

Meg had never bothered to lock her door, but now she went over and turned the key. Then she took a sleeping pill from the bottle in the drawer of her bedside table. A long night's sleep was what she needed; then in the morning everything would seem different. She got into bed and turned off the light. Sleep overcame her almost at once.

2

HOURS passed before Meg jerked awake and sat up in bed. She heard again the far-off thread of music, still eerie, ghostlike, but now nearer. Pop music? Not so very far away a radio was playing. The sound seemed to come from the attic above her room. Meg fumbled for the light switch and looked at her clock. It was nearly four.

There was, of course, someone in the house. Meg had suspected this with part of her mind all last evening. If she had not been so befuddled with tiredness, she would have known it when she found her note to Mrs. Dawlish among the pile of letters on the chest. At once she imagined the envelope falling through the letter slot to lie on the mat. Someone had picked up that letter, the same someone who had drunk her whisky, cleared out her refrigerator, sat smoking by the unlit fire, and, worst of all, taken a bath in her bathroom.

Shivering in her thin nightgown, Meg got up and crossed the room. The music had stopped as abruptly as before. When she reached the door, she realized that she did not dare to unlock it. She put her ear to the panel. Had she imagined sounds of furtive movement? Now she was sure that someone was standing in the corridor, listening, drawn there perhaps by the line of light under the door.

The telephone was on the bedside table. The sensible thing would be to call the police. But it would be some time before they could get here, and suppose that, after all, there was no one in the house? She picked up the receiver and dialed Felix's number. His telephone must be beside his bed too, because he answered immediately.

He cut off Meg's whispered explanations, saying only, "I'll come round at once. Stay where you are."

As he rang off, Meg felt light-headed with relief and gratitude. He would know what to do. She hurried to put on the slacks and sweater she had worn last night, and only when she was at the window, watch-

ing for Felix's flashlight, did she ask herself how he was to get in. The thought of opening her bedroom door made Meg shiver again. Then, forcing herself to keep calm, she wondered why she was so afraid. Whoever was in the house had done no damage, probably wanted only food and somewhere to hide.

A light was moving among the trees toward the house. Taking a deep breath, Meg forced herself to unlock the door. There was no one waiting for her in the corridor, but as she hurried toward the stairs she was certain that someone was still in the house with her. On the landing she glanced up at the trapdoor that led to the attic. It was closed.

Downstairs the ticking of the old clock in the hall seemed unusually loud. In a panic she ran down the passage, unbolted the back door, and flung it open as Felix Palmer came around the corner of the house.

"It's good of you to come." Meg wished that her voice were not so high and uneven. "Let's go into the kitchen." She paused in the doorway, fumbling for the light switch, half suspecting that she would see someone there. But the kitchen was empty, although her grocery cupboard was ajar.

Felix's head was bare; his sandy hair stood on end, and his pajama collar stuck up above the raincoat. He must have taken time only to put on a coat, trousers, and shoes, and to find the gun which he now laid on the table. He looked so unlike his usual dapper self that Meg began to laugh. His brown eyes searched her face suspiciously, and he put his hand on her arm. "Get your breath and then let's hear all about it," he said. "I'm going to make you a cup of tea."

"Tea!" she protested. "When there's someone in my house!"

He took no notice, and she watched him fill the kettle; then he found the tea, sugar, a teapot, cups, and spoons, with the assurance of a man used to looking after himself.

Meg opened the refrigerator to get the milk. "Look, only one bottle of milk instead of two," she said. "That was the first odd thing. Oh, no—the music was before that, and the front door was bolted, and—"

"Sit down," he said. He poured the tea and sat opposite her. "Tea's good for shock," he said. "You get that down and then let's begin at the beginning."

The hot tea revived her. She was able to tell her story.

"I see," Felix said when she had finished, and he sat frowning at the

table. "There's something I didn't tell you last evening. A few days ago, I thought I saw a light in your house and I came to investigate. Someone was in the orchard, smoking a cigarette. I shouted, and whoever it was moved off in a hurry. I shined my flashlight on the windows and tried all the doors. Nothing seemed out of order."

"You should have told me."

"And scared you for nothing? I came round last night and everything seemed all right, except for the whisky. . . ."

Meg got up and went to the cupboard. "Why didn't I look in here before?" she said. "Someone has taken all the canned meat. The crackers and the cans of fruit have gone, and two jars of jam."

Felix picked up the gun. Weighing it in his hand, he said, "What I can't understand is why he hasn't left before now. I mean, it's all very well to hide in an empty house, but why stay on when the owner comes back? And that business of the front door. I can understand his bolting it to make sure that no one with a key could surprise him, but why did he unbolt it again, unless he knew you were coming back?"

"Perhaps he read my letter to Mrs. Dawlish."

"Had it been opened?"

"I didn't look. I put it on the fire."

"Let's take it that he read it. Then why didn't he go? He must be very stupid, or very desperate. Perhaps we had better call the police."

Meg knew that he did not want to call the police. He would hate to miss a chance of some excitement and playing an active role again. "Let's see if there really is someone in the house first," she suggested. "We would look rather silly if no one was here."

"Very well," he said. He got up and went out into the passage.

To their right was the dining room. Meg smiled as Felix peered behind the curtains; there was nowhere else in the room for even a cat to hide. The furnace room was given a quick glance, then the cloakroom, and the small room where she did the flowers. "Surely we are wasting time?" said Meg. "The music came from the attic."

"Best to make sure," said Felix, and she knew that he was not to be hurried. She waited in the hall while he made a thorough search of the sitting room and study. A cold gray light was in the windows; morning had come, although the sun had not yet risen.

Meg looked up the well of the stairs. She no longer felt any inclina-

tion to smile. Somewhere above them was a human being. Had he sensed that she and Felix were moving toward him, and was he crouching in some corner, waiting and listening, afraid, as she now was?

Felix came into the hall again and moved purposefully toward the stairs, and she followed closely behind him. When they reached the landing, she touched his arm and pointed to the trapdoor.

"How do you get up there?" Felix whispered.

"There's a ladder that hooks on. It's in the closet over there."

The ladder was in its usual place. As Felix fixed it under the trapdoor, Meg said, "But how did he get into the attic? The ladder couldn't have put itself back into the closet."

"Perhaps he stood on a chair," Felix said. "No—stupid of me—there's no chair."

"Perhaps he found the ladder in the tool shed," Meg suggested. "I'm sure there's someone up there waiting for you. Don't go up—it's dangerous. He could hit you on the head. There's a light switch on the floor, to the right, but you wouldn't have time to find it. Let's call the police." But Felix was already up the short ladder and pushing back the trapdoor. Meg was left staring at the gaping darkness. When she climbed after him, he had found the switch; a dim light shone down from the bulb that hung from the rafters.

The bulb lit a pile of suitcases, several trunks, bags of golf clubs, packing cases—and the garden ladder. The long space that ended at the small dormer window above her bedroom was lost in almost total darkness. It was cold and musty, and there was an odd smell in the air that, for a moment, Meg did not recognize. Then she knew that it was the smell of a snuffed-out candle.

Felix gripped her arm. Something was moving at the end of the attic. They both heard the faint, cautious rustle. Felix stepped in front of her. "Come out of that," he called, and raised the gun.

The rustling stopped. Meg's palms were damp with sweat as she stared into the cobwebby darkness. "It's no use," Felix said, raising his voice. "We know you're there. You can see this gun."

His voice, she had to admit, had exactly the right tone of command. Almost at once someone was coming toward them, edging between the packing cases, emerging at last into the circle of light.

"Why, it's only a child!" Meg cried. "A little girl!" Her laughter,

which she knew was slightly hysterical as well as relieved, stopped as the apparition lifted its head to scowl at her. Meg saw long, mousy-fair and greasy hair, a thin white face, and an unchildish flash of blue eyes.

"It's a girl," Felix agreed, and Meg saw that she was small and slight, perhaps not more than fourteen. Felix clamped his hand on the thin shoulder, dragging their intruder into the light. "Stand still," he said. "Let's have a good look at you. What are you up to?"

At once the girl flailed at him with both fists, swearing, scratching like a small cornered cat. Kicking out in tight leather boots beneath her thigh-length skirt, she caught him over the shin. He grunted, and cuffed the child on the side of the head.

"Major Palmer, don't hit her!" Meg cried.

"Better telephone for the police," he panted. "We've caught a proper little spitfire."

The girl sank her teeth into his wrist and, as he snatched his hand away, tore herself loose. Sobbing noisily, she ran straight to Meg. Meg closed her arms around the small, shivering, crying form.

Felix held his handkerchief to his bleeding wrist. "Don't let her get round you with tears," he said. "She's up to no good." He said to the girl in a bullying tone that Meg resented, "Come on, let's hear what you've got to say for yourself."

"There's no need to shout," protested Meg. "Let's go down to the kitchen, where it's warm. We can ask your questions there."

The girl's sobs stopped. A hoarse, slightly cockney, but not unpleasing voice said, "Please, get me out of this horrible dark place. I'm so cold, I'm frozen." As they moved toward the trapdoor, small, icy-cold fingers felt for Meg's hand, as if asking for protection.

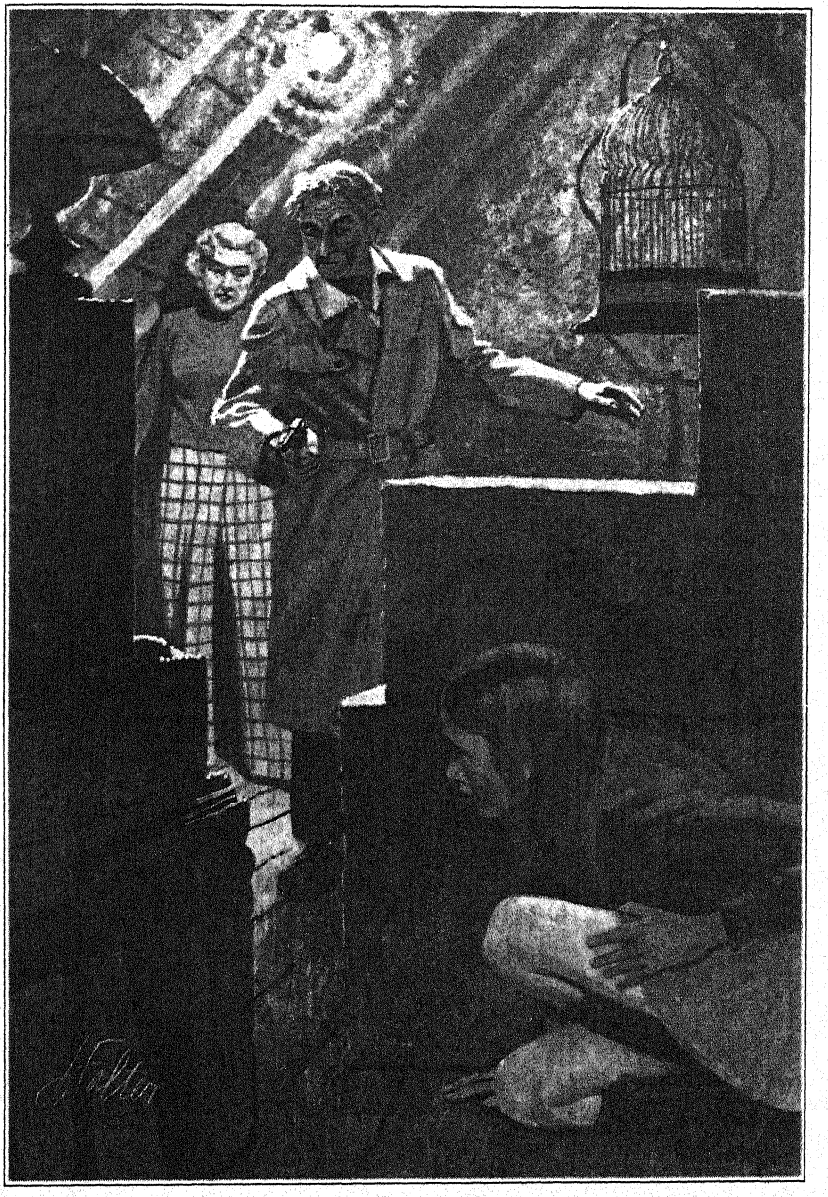
When they reached the bottom of the ladder, Meg said, "You have forgotten your transistor."

At once the white face, streaked with dirt and tears, became blank. The blue eyes stared stupidly.

"I heard you playing it, you know," Meg said gently. "You had better fetch it, hadn't you?"

The girl hesitated, but even as Felix cried, "Don't let her up there alone," she was up the ladder like a cat.

He moved as if to follow her, and Meg put out her hand to stop him. "There's no other way out of the attic," she said. Then, seeing that his



wrist was bleeding badly, she added, "That's a nasty bite, but you needn't have been so rough." At a sound behind them she turned. The girl, holding a small dark green radio, was standing there.

Meg led the way down the stairs. The warmth of the kitchen came to meet them as she opened the door, and she realized that the short time in the attic had chilled her to the bone. "Sit down while I see to Major Palmer's wrist," she told the girl. "You have given him a horrid bite, you know."

"Good." The word dropped like a pebble.

"Charming little lady, isn't she?" Felix said as Meg washed his wrist at the sink. When she tied the bandage he shouted suddenly, "You wait, young woman! You won't talk like that to the police."

The girl glared back at Felix. She was putting up a brave front, but it was obvious that she was terrified. Meg saw the chin tremble and the blue eyes look at her beseechingly.

She said quickly, "Let's talk it over first. I'll make coffee, and I think that some brandy would do us all good. There's a bottle in that cupboard, Major Palmer. Be an angel and open it."

She put the percolator on the stove, and soon the comfortable smell of coffee filled the kitchen. The clock showed that it was nearly six. Early morning sunshine lay on the garden.

As the brandy and the warmth of the kitchen took effect, a faint color rose in the girl's face. It was a plain face, with a high forehead, small chin and nose, and a determined thin-lipped mouth. Only the very blue eyes were remarkable. Meg found something appealing about both the face and the skinny body with its gamin, rather than childish, look.

Felix obviously did not. He was watching the girl with hostility and suspicion. "*Now,*" he began in a hectoring tone.

"What is your name?" Meg interrupted softly.

The girl turned toward her at once. "Chris."

Meg smiled and, to her surprise, the girl smiled briefly back. Encouraged, Meg said, "Chris. What else?"

The fair head was shaken, the lips closed firmly, as if she regretted lowering her guard for a moment.

"We will have to find out, you know."

"And what are you doing here?" Felix said, overriding her gentle

words. "To begin with, you are trespassing. And worse, you have broken into this house!" He hit the table with his bandaged hand.

Chris drew herself up in her chair and stuck her chin out. "I didn't break anything. I just walked in. The back door was open. A woman came out carrying a basket of dead flowers."

"Mrs. Dawlish, I suppose," Felix said. "And what were you doing, skulking about?"

"I was watching the house. I'd been in the garden for ages, behind all those hedges and trees. When the coast was clear I nipped in. I'd seen her—Mrs. Starr, isn't it?—go off hours before in a car."

Meg intervened. "But why?"

Chris looked directly at her. "I needed somewhere to hide."

"Hide from what?"

No answer. The obstinate blank look was back again.

"We'll leave that for the present," Felix said. "You found your way to the attic. And then?"

"When that woman went away, I came down."

"To steal Mrs. Starr's food?"

"I was hungry."

This was said indignantly, as if that were sufficient justification, as perhaps it was. Distressed, Meg put out her hand, a silent gesture of which Felix took no notice. "You ate Mrs. Starr's food, smoked her cigarettes, drank her whisky. You are a common little thief."

"The whisky was . . . it was because I was so cold. You see, I was in the wood most of the night and it rained. I'm not a thief."

"And that's why you had a hot bath in my bathroom?" said Meg.

Chris nodded. "It was heaven. Those bath salts!"

"You should have tidied up a bit; then I might never have known!" Meg was rewarded by another smile. Following up her advantage, she said, "So you stayed here for five days. You took the precaution of bolting the front door. What made you unbolt it?"

"Because you were coming back yesterday."

"And how did you know that?"

"I heard you say so. You were walking to the car and that woman was carrying your suitcase. I was behind the hedge. You said, 'Have a nice rest. See you next Thursday,' or something like that."

"But Mrs. Dawlish couldn't get in."

"I waited until . . ." Chris hesitated.

Afraid that the girl was going to lie, Meg prompted her. "You read my letter to Mrs. Dawlish?"

Chris said, almost inaudibly, "It wasn't properly stuck down."

Felix could not contain himself any longer. "Well, when you knew when Mrs. Starr was coming back, why didn't you go?"

"I had my reasons." This was said in such a lofty manner that Meg could not help smiling. The child had courage.

Chris turned back to her and said, "I thought you wouldn't know I was there."

"I was bound to find out before long, you know, even if you hadn't made the mistake of playing your radio."

A flash of amusement appeared on Chris's face. It vanished as Felix picked up the transistor. "Brand new, and expensive, I should say." He swung around on the girl. "You stole this, didn't you?"

Chris's face was white again—with fear, or rage? "I didn't. I never! My dad gave it to me."

"Now perhaps we'll get somewhere. What's your dad's name?"

Again there was no answer, only a mutinous look.

Felix rose. "Where's your telephone, Mrs. Starr? In the hall? I've had enough of her evasions. I'm going to call the police."

Chris jumped up and ran to the door. Standing with her back to it, she cried, "No, no! Don't let him. I'll tell the whole thing."

Meg said, "Let's hear what Chris has to say."

Felix hesitated. "Pack of lies, that's all it will be."

"Can't you give her a chance?" Meg said sharply, and he sat down.

The girl came slowly to Meg and said, "I ran away from home. I couldn't stand it any longer."

"Go on," said Meg encouragingly. "What was the trouble?"

The words came quickly now, in a rush. "You see, my dad, he said I could take this secretarial course when I left school. Then he changed his mind and made me work in the shop and I hated it. When I wasn't in the shop my aunt made me help with my little brothers, horrid spoiled brats. You see, my aunt doesn't like me, never did. She came to help out when my mother went off with some man, and she's at me morning and night. It's no sort of life. . . ."

"How old are you, Chris?"

"I'll be seventeen in four months."

"And where do you live?"

"Lewisham. My dad's got a shop. Tobacconist and sweets."

"How did you get here from Lewisham?"

Chris looked down at the floor. Her hair hid her face. At last she raised her head and said, "I hitchhiked. I was going to Dover. I thought if I got over to France, they wouldn't find me."

"The Dover road is over four miles from this house," Felix said. "How did you get here?"

"Walked."

"I don't believe it. None of you young things will walk a yard."

Chris said in a rapid singsong voice, "I got a ride on a lorry. It was going all the way to Dover, the driver said. He let me sit by him in the cab, but he started to get fresh. He pulled in off the road and wouldn't leave me alone. I hit him hard and he pushed me out. I was afraid he would come after me, so I ran as fast as I could down a side road."

"Poor child!" said Meg, but Felix snorted.

Chris went on. "It was quite dark and I didn't know where I was. I ran and ran. Then there was a village, but I didn't stop. I was afraid I would be sent home again. Quite soon there was a steep hill. . . . I couldn't go any further so I hid in a wood until it got light."

Meg frowned. Was the child lying? There *was* a steep hill halfway to the village.

Felix broke the silence. "I don't believe a word of it."

Chris screamed, "It's true! It's true!"

Meg looked from the white, desperate face to Felix. She said slowly, "Her story seems quite plausible to me."

He raised his eyebrows and said, "My dear Mrs. Starr! It's full of holes. Let me call the police. They at least will take her home."

"Oh, no!" Chris wailed. "Not the police!"

Meg said, "We must do something, Chris. Your family will be worrying. You have been away for nearly a week, haven't you? Perhaps your father has been to the police himself."

"Not likely!" Chris said with scorn. "I tell you, he doesn't care what happens to me. Anyway, I left a letter. I told him I was going off to stay with a girl I knew and look for a decent job. I said I would let him know how I got on."

Meg put her arm around the girl's shoulders. "Chris, give me your father's telephone number. I'll let him know you are safe. You can have another hot bath and I'll bring you a proper breakfast. Then you must have a good long sleep. This afternoon I'll drive you home."

Chris pulled herself away. "No!" she cried. "I won't go home. My dad would half kill me."

Felix laughed. "I'd like to meet your dad," he said. "A father who can instill respect in his child would be a refreshing sight these days. What did you do, girl? Rob the till?"

Chris whirled around to face him. "Yes, I did. So there!"

Felix looked at Meg. "I was right," he said. "A thief."

"I'm not a thief! He didn't give me any wages." She turned to Meg. "Let me stay here with you. Please, please."

The thin arms clung like tentacles when Meg, embarrassed and alarmed by the storm of tears that followed, tried to release herself. Over the head pressed against her breast she looked at Felix. He was embarrassed too, perhaps even a little ashamed.

"That's enough, Chris." Meg tried to speak sternly. The girl lifted a drenched face, and the eyes, so startlingly blue, looked up at her imploringly. Meg heard herself saying, "There, there, don't cry. You can stay. Something can be arranged."

WHEN Meg came downstairs carrying Chris's breakfast tray, she found Mrs. Dawlish talking to Felix Palmer.

Mrs. Dawlish's broad, sallow face wore the disapproving expression Meg usually dreaded. Felix, she saw, had shaved and dressed properly before hurrying back across the orchard. She had promised not to telephone to Chris's father until he was with her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Dawlish," Meg said. "I see that Major Palmer has given you our news. What do you think of it?"

Mrs. Dawlish took the tray. "Not much, since you ask me, Mrs. Starr. Gives me a turn to think of her creeping in behind my back."

"I made up the bed in Philip's room while Chris was having a hot bath. She fell asleep as soon as she had finished her breakfast."

"Taking her breakfast in bed! You're too good, Mrs. Starr. Dangerous, it might turn out to be. What do we know about her?"

Meg could not help laughing. "You go up and take a peep at her,

Mrs. Dawlish," she said, "and you'll see that she doesn't look very dangerous now. She looks what she is, an exhausted child fast asleep."

Mrs. Dawlish sniffed, but curiosity won, as Meg had known it would. "Well, I'll just take this tray into the kitchen and then I'll run and make sure the young madam isn't up to anything."

"I made her write the telephone number down," Meg said to Felix. "Extraordinary how reluctant she was to give it. Chris must be very frightened of her father, poor child. His name is Fred Standford."

Felix dialed the number, then gave the receiver to Meg. Almost at once Mr. Standford answered, his voice brusque and rather loud. "What's she been up to now?" he said on hearing Chris's name. But when he knew where she was and that no trouble was in store for him, he made it plain that he only wanted to get back to his shop.

Meg's voice sharpened when she told him that she would keep the girl for a few days and then drive up with her to talk to him. He sounded reluctant, even alarmed, but eventually agreed that this should be next Tuesday afternoon. When Meg asked him if he had any message, he said truculently, "Ask her about my twenty quid."

As Meg put the receiver down, her cheeks were hot. "Some people don't deserve to have children," she said to Felix. "Poor Chris, he didn't show the least concern or interest. If she hadn't taken his wretched money, I doubt if he would have known that she had gone."

"Remember one thing," Felix said. "He must know his own daughter better than you do. I wish I had spoken to him. I would have asked him when he gave her an expensive radio."

Meg kept her temper with difficulty. "Why have you taken such an unreasoning dislike to this poor child?"

"She's no child. She's an artful, lying little minx. Nothing about her rings true." He moved toward the door. "Oh, well," he said. "She'll soon be gone, and the sooner the better."

At the door he paused. "I think it would be just as well if I went with you on Tuesday. These people could try something—you never know."

"I would rather take her alone, thank you. You are too prejudiced against her, and I don't want to make it more difficult. You see, I'm going to bring Chris back with me. I have plans for her."

"Plans? Do you mean to say that you want to adopt her, or something idiotic like that?"

"And why should it be idiotic? You were saying only last evening that it was a pity I hadn't a daughter or a granddaughter, someone I could 'take an interest in'—those were your words, weren't they?"

He stared at her as if he thought she had gone out of her mind. "I can see that she has taken you in properly."

"That's all you want to see. Have you no pity? Can't you see how unhappy and lost she is?"

Felix flushed but did not look away. He said solemnly, "Pity is a dangerous emotion, Mrs. Starr. I advise you to think before you indulge in it. I keep my pity for the persecuted and helpless."

"I know—for stray cats and dogs! The trouble with all you people who are maudlin about animals is that you've no compassion for any human being. . . ." Ashamed at her outburst, she held out her hand. "I shouldn't have said that. You have been very kind to me. I don't know what I should have done without you. But now I must not keep you any longer."

He took her hand reluctantly. "Well, I won't say any more then—but you'll be sorry."

3

MAY was unusually warm, with fine spring weather that changed into a precocious summer. There was sunshine day after day, and the few showers that fell at night kept the garden green.

The three weeks since Meg's return from London had not been easy. But now, as she sat writing to Rosa at her desk in the window of the sitting room, she was happier than she had been for a long time.

"Chris is good and biddable on the whole," Meg wrote, "but she can become suddenly surly and offhand, and when she digs her toes in, nothing will budge her. The improvement, though, is rather wonderful in such a short time. The child is filling out, becoming almost pretty. She always seems glad to be with me and never wants to leave the house for long, or to meet people. It worries me sometimes, so this afternoon I'm taking her to Canterbury to show her the cathedral.

"Chris likes going to the village, and does all my shopping. Being a real little Londoner, she was scandalized that I had to wait for newspapers to be delivered, so she goes to fetch them on Michael's old bike.

She pores over the papers—not only the *Express* but *The Times*—though so far I haven't been able to get her to read a book."

Meg raised her head and looked across the lawn to where Chris knelt, industriously planting a box of seedlings. Against the dark yew hedge the girl's loose shirt, worn over linen slacks, was a vivid blue, and the long fair hair, tied back today in a ponytail, shone in the sunlight.

It was strange that Chris had been so docile about her clothes. After that shocking interview with her father, Chris had wanted to come straight home. But when Meg suggested they go shopping, pointing out that Chris's thick skirt and padded nylon jacket were too heavy for the warm weather, she had given in. Chris had roused herself from what had seemed almost a trance only to argue over the length of the skirts, but even here gave in quickly. It had been unnatural that a young girl should not be excited and grateful when given so many pretty new things. On the way home, Chris, as she so often did, made amends. Putting a hand on Meg's knee, the child had said, "Thank you, you're so good to me"; but then, "It's not much further, is it?"

Chris was becoming a real help in the garden, where, although Lawns Ltd. dealt with the grass cutting, there was always so much to do. Old Gregory, Meg's part-time gardener, could manage only the vegetable garden. Chris seemed to have taken an especial fancy to the side garden and spent most of the fine days there, sometimes lying on a blanket in the sun, her transistor turned to full volume.

"Do you like gardening, Chris?" Meg had asked a few days ago.

"Not really. I do it to help you."

This had seemed too good to be true. Meg had said dryly, "You aren't very eager to help with the housework."

Chris had grimaced at her. "That would be helping horrid old Dawlish, not you. I cook, when you let me, don't I?" Then Chris had put her cheek against Meg's and said, "I'd do anything for you."

It was a pity that Mrs. Dawlish insisted on being so difficult. "She's sly, Mrs. Starr," she would say. She also said that Chris was greedy, always at the refrigerator. It was true that Chris was given to snacks, but surely that was natural in a growing creature.

Felix Palmer, too, had been extremely tiresome when, curious to know the result of the meeting with Chris's family, he had come to the house after they arrived back. When he heard it had been agreed that

Chris should stay with Meg for at least six months, "while we see how we get on together," he had shown that he thought Meg a fool. "No one else wants her," she had pleaded. "Chris's father was only too pleased to get her off his hands."

Chris's father had met them in the shop, coming out from behind his counter to shake hands. He was smaller, sharper than Meg had expected after hearing his gruff, abrupt voice on the telephone—a colorless, tired, bitter little man. He had taken without comment the paper on which Meg had written the names and addresses of her lawyer and bank. When she hinted that she might make herself responsible for Chris's future, he had stared at her, as if about to make some suggestion, and then had evidently thought better of it. He had accepted the twenty pounds that she gave him, smiling skeptically when Meg assured him that Chris would repay her someday, and had looked at his daughter with weary dislike.

The aunt had seemed an incompetent, silly woman, trying to excuse herself. "I do my best, but you know what girls are these days, wild, nothing in their heads except boys. I never know what she's up to."

Felix had listened to Meg's story without interrupting, and when she admitted that Chris's father had denied any knowledge of the transistor and that Chris had then said a friend had given it to her, he had merely shaken his head. When Meg finished, Felix's only comment was that it might be difficult to get rid of the girl after six months, if she lasted that long. Meg had lost her temper, telling him that she would never want to get rid of Chris, and Felix had gone away without another word. But, unlike Mrs. Dawlish, he showed signs of relenting. He had asked her and Chris to come over for a drink that evening.

"Rosa, there is so much to undo," Meg wrote now. "I find it fascinating and absorbing to try and remold this young mind."

She looked out again at the sunlit garden. Chris was sitting back on her heels and, trowel in hand, was staring up at the house. The girl's intent stillness caught Meg's attention. Chris was looking at something high above the sitting-room window and was smiling a radiant smile that transformed the hard little face, making it soft and tender.

Meg called out, "What are you looking at, Chris? A bird?"

Chris, startled, jumped to her feet and stared across the lawn as if she had been roused from a dream. Then she sauntered over to the

window. The blue eyes met Meg's with their merriest, most candid look, a look Meg had learned to distrust. "There's a nest up there," Chris told her. "A bird goes swooping in and out."

Meg smiled. "A swallow. They always build under the dormer window. I didn't know you were interested in birds."

"Oh, yes," Chris said airily, and, looking past Meg into the sitting room, "I'd forgotten that you were in there. What are you doing?"

"I'm writing to Rosa Maitland, my friend who went to Canada. I want to catch her before she leaves for New York."

"She's not coming back, is she? I thought she'd gone for months." Chris seemed suddenly alarmed. What could it matter to her when Rosa came back? Could the child be jealous?

"No, no," Meg said soothingly. "Rosa is only going to New York for a few days. I want her to buy something for me there."

Chris said, "That's all right then. I mean, we don't want anyone else here, do we? You and me—that's all we need."

Meg did not know what to say to this seemingly artless avowal. Did Chris mean it? But why . . .

"Is it eleven yet?" Chris suddenly asked.

Smiling at her brisk change of tone, Meg said, "Five past. Hungry again? Run along. Mrs. Dawlish will be having her elevenses."

THEY put the car in the garage and Meg looked at her watch. "Half past six, Chris. Hurry and change."

"Change!" Chris was tired and in a temper. "Just to walk across the orchard for a drink with old Sandy Fox? The trouble with you, Meg, is you're old-fashioned."

"I told you before not to call me Meg."

"Mar-gar-et. What a mouthful! I like Meg better."

Meg would have liked to give Chris a good shaking. She said, "Hurry, Chris. Major Palmer has taken the trouble to invite us; it's only polite to take a little trouble in return, and not to be late."

Chris sniffed and turned sullenly toward the stairs.

The afternoon's expedition had not been a success. In the cathedral Chris had trailed after Meg, showing no interest in the awe-inspiring vistas or in the organ music that filled the vast building with its surge and fall. Afterward she had seemed happy only when they were in the

crowded streets of Canterbury, looking into the shopwindows. She had bought some cigarettes and, although Meg had known that it would be a mistake, she had said, "It's a pity to smoke so much at your age."

"Must you nag at me?" Chris had snapped, and then, taking Meg's arm, she had said, "Don't let's have tea here. I want to get home."

Perhaps it was a waste of time to try to broaden Chris's mind, Meg thought now, as she tiredly followed her upstairs to wash and change.

She had expected that Chris would keep her waiting. To her surprise the girl was downstairs almost as soon as Meg was. "Well, will I do?" Chris asked, twirling. The short pink dress was one of her favorites; she had put on low-heeled sandals, pinned her hair up in a twist, added a dab of lipstick and even a touch of blue eye shadow. She seemed not only pleased with herself but remarkably cheerful.

Meg's spirits rose. She could not help smiling, but only said, "Quite a transformation in such a short time. You had better take a cardigan."

They started along the lane that curved around the wood separating Meg's garden from Felix Palmer's property. The evening was so warm, so still, that it might have been full summer. Nightingales came back to this wood every year. Meg and Jocelyn had often walked here on moonlit nights listening to their liquid notes. Her tiredness became overlaid by a sense of peace. For the first time since Jocelyn's death she thought of him without pain.

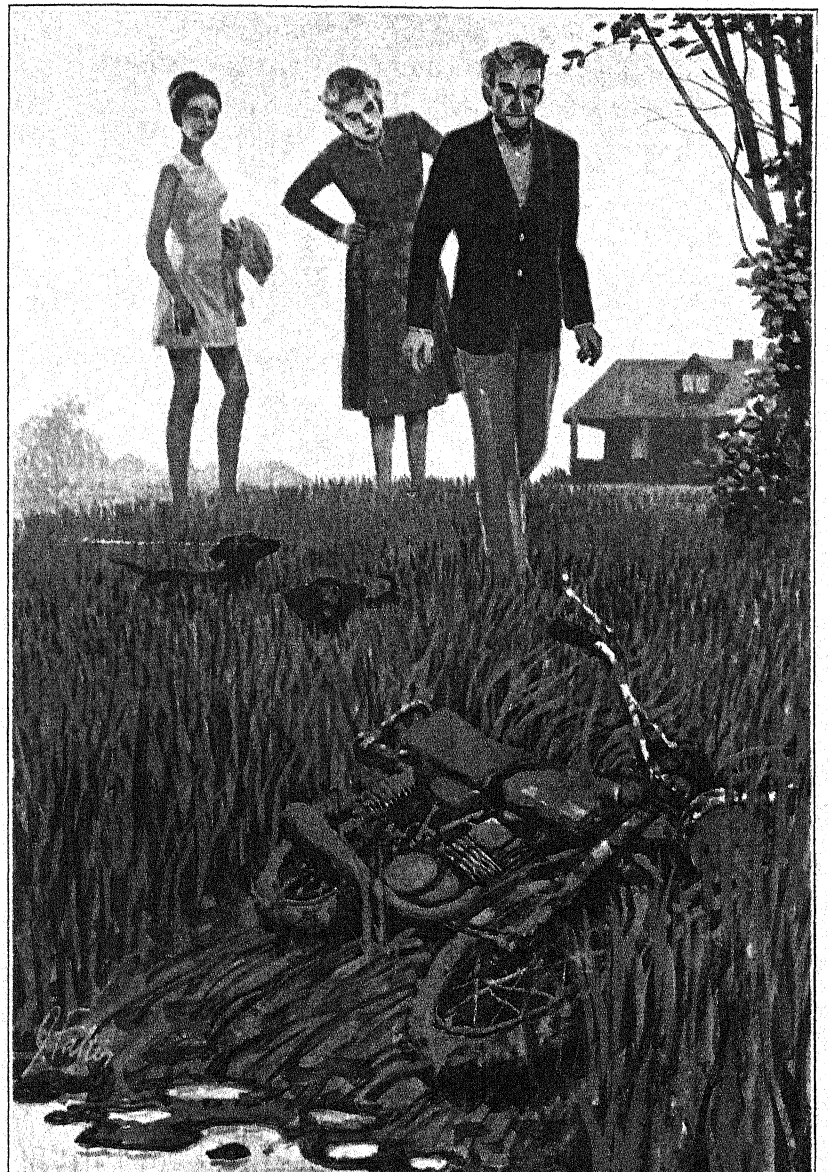
Felix's bungalow, roofed with shingles, appeared as neat and well kept as its owner. As Meg lifted a brass owl's-head door knocker, the two dachshunds, yapping shrilly, poured around the side of the house. They were followed by Felix.

"So there you are!" he said. "I had gone into the field to meet you—no idea you would come by the lane." He was wearing a dark blue blazer with brass buttons, and his brown shoes were highly polished. He said, "Before we go in, there's something extraordinary I want to show you. Can't understand it."

He led them across the lawn toward the wood. At the corner where the wood met the hedge that ran along the lane was a small pond fringed with rushes. On the grass bank lay a mud-stained motorbike.

"Is that all?" Chris exclaimed. "A silly old bike! I thought at least you'd found a buried treasure or a bomb or something."

Felix ignored her. "It's not old, it's a new model. That's one odd



thing, Mrs. Starr. Another is that the license plates have been taken off. Then the tool kit is missing, and the petrol tank is empty."

He bent down and unwound a trail of weeds from the handlebars. "I was throwing a ball for the dogs after luncheon, and they lost it in these reeds. When I went to look for it I saw the handlebars sticking up out of the water. I had a lot of trouble getting the bike out."

Meg said, "How did a motorbike get into your pond?"

"Someone wheeled it from the lane into the wood. Look, you can see where it was forced through those bushes. Then it was toppled down the bank into the water. If it hadn't been for this long dry spell, it mightn't have been found for months. Bad luck for someone!"

Meg frowned, disliking this violation of her familiar little wood which, only moments before, had seemed the quintessence of peace. "Why should anyone want to put it there?" she protested.

Felix shrugged. "Why indeed, unless it was stolen." He turned suddenly to Chris. "Do you know anything about this, young woman?"

Chris's mouth opened in astonishment. "Me?" she said shrilly.

"Really, Major Palmer," said Meg. "You find a motorbike in your pond and immediately try to connect it with Chris. Why?"

"Well, they both turned up out of the blue." Felix smiled. "No need to get so heated. It was only a thought." As he shepherded them across the lawn he said, "We must leave it to the police."

"Is that necessary?" Meg asked slowly.

"I'm afraid so—remember that the license plates are missing. I rang the police at once and they said they would send someone round. They might want to ask you a few questions, if you saw or heard a motorbike in the lane, for instance. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind? I don't mind answering any questions, but I greatly dislike the thought of the police coming here and, even more, of that wretched motorbike, turning up here, of all places."

Chris, a few steps in front of them, bent to pick up an old tennis ball, then hurled it toward the gate. At once the dachshunds tore after it, with the girl running behind them. Meg smiled as she watched the pink dress and slim legs flashing across the lawn. "What energy!" she said as they came running back. "It makes me feel old just to watch it!"

As Felix opened his front door and stood aside to let Meg pass, he said, "No place is safe these days—as I said to you before."

The large sitting room was typical of its owner, being neat, clean, and rather ugly. In each of the three armchairs lay a sleeping tabby cat. Over the brick fireplace hung a large oil portrait of a man in a dark green uniform, high-collared and braided. Meg walked over to it.

"My father," Felix said, "in the mess dress of his regiment—a Gurkha regiment in which I served in my turn."

Meg said, "You are very like him."

"I doubt if he'd feel flattered. What can I give you to drink?"

Felix, she saw, had put himself to some trouble, lighting an unnecessary fire, arranging a white embroidered cloth on a table, and setting out glasses, bottles, and a plate of cookies. Now he turned the cats out of the chairs, seated his guests one on each side of the fire, and busied himself with their drinks.

Almost at once, Chris jumped up from her chair and, holding a cigarette and the glass of sherry he had given her, wandered around, glancing at his books. "I rather like this room," she announced. "There isn't too much in it, not like Margaret's sitting room. How do you keep it so clean with all these animals about? Look, Meg, a basket full of kittens and a tank of fish. Haven't you any birds, Major Palmer?"

"Do sit down, Chris," Meg said a bit sharply, and, as she saw the girl slide a drawer of the walnut desk open and shut it quickly again, "What *are* you doing? You'll spill your sherry."

Felix was helping himself at the drink table. "Nothing would induce me to keep a pet bird. I hate to see any living thing in a cage."

"I couldn't agree with you more," Chris said. "I think it's downright wicked to keep anyone, or anything, shut in."

That remark seems meant for me, but why? Meg thought, gazing at the flushed, earnest young face.

Chris, as if Meg had spoken, gave her a startled look. "Why are you staring at me?" she said. "You don't know everything about me, do you? You don't know that this is the sort of room I should like to live in, everything easy and ordinary, no one saying, 'Don't do that, do this,' all the time!" She picked up one of the dachshunds. "You're a lucky dog," she said. "You do just what you like."

It would be foolish to feel hurt, Meg thought, and saw that the girl had withdrawn into one of her abstracted moods, was looking suddenly much older, worried, intent. Meg had learned to ignore these sudden

changes of mood and now began to tell Felix the latest news of Rosa.

As if coming to some decision, Chris pushed the dog off her lap, stood up, and, interrupting them, said in a wheedling way, "May I have a look at the rest of your house, Major Palmer?"

Felix glanced at the girl—suspiciously, Meg thought. "There's nothing much to see. It's just an ordinary bungalow."

"I love looking at other people's houses," Chris told him. Without waiting for an answer, she disappeared through the nearest door.

Felix half rose, then sat down again. "What do you suppose the chit is up to?" he asked. "Just bored sitting here with us old fogies, I suppose." Then, his face a deep red, he said, "I didn't mean you."

Meg laughed. "But I *am* an old fogy to Chris. I infuriate her." And she told him of the expedition to Canterbury.

Felix listened gloomily, and then, as he refilled her glass, he said, "Have you any plans for that girl? I mean, she ought to be working at something, earning her living, not just hanging about all day and sponging on you."

"But I *like* having Chris with me."

Felix said doggedly, "But it's bad for the girl. She comes of people used to hard work. You'll make her soft, unfit for any other sort of life."

"Chris has only been with me for just over three weeks," Meg protested. "But you are quite right. If anything happened to me, what would become of her? Well, I mean to see that her future is secure. I must ring up my lawyer."

"What about your sons? Would they approve?"

"My sons can look after themselves and, anyway, Jocelyn provided for them. I am sure they would agree."

"Don't be too sure of that. Why not give Chris a good training in something? That would be the kindest thing." He smiled. "You look furious. Whenever you and I meet, we always end in disagreeing."

Once again Meg relented. "As a matter of fact, I have been thinking of a secretarial course for Chris. . . ."

"What's all this?" Chris was standing behind them, holding a kitten, her eyes wide with alarm. "Oh, Margaret, you're not going to send me away?"

How long had she been there? Meg wondered. "Of course not," she said soothingly. "I was only thinking that in the autumn . . ."

"That's months away," Chris said. "I thought . . ." She bent down and put the kitten into the basket. "I like your kittens, Major Palmer, and I like your house."

Felix said, "Would you like to keep that kitten, if Mrs. Starr agrees?"

Was this Felix's way of making amends? "Of course you can have a kitten, Chris," Meg said.

There was a moment's silence, then Chris said, "I don't really want it. It would be better off here."

Vexed, Meg said, "What do you mean, Chris? Why don't you want that kitten? You might at least say thank you to Major Palmer."

"Thank you," Chris said obediently. Then, raising her voice, she said rudely, "Why? Why? Why? Why must I explain everything to you? I don't want a kitten! I haven't got time—" She stopped and put her hand over her mouth.

"My dear child," Meg said. "What is the matter?"

"Sorry, Margaret," Chris said. "Forget it. Isn't it time we left?"

"It's not eight yet," Felix protested and then, looking from Meg to Chris, stood up. "But I won't try to keep you. The dachs and I will walk as far as the orchard with you. It's a lovely evening."

Leaving the front door open, he kept by Meg's side, talking tactfully and ignoring Chris, who trailed behind them. With the dogs running ahead, they passed through his garden and out into the field. As they reached the gate into the orchard and he opened it for Meg, Chris called, "I've forgotten my cardigan—I won't be a minute."

The girl ran off, and Meg said, "I apologize for Chris. It was too bad of her to spoil a delightful evening. Thank you for asking us."

He took her outstretched hand. "Don't give it a thought. I enjoyed myself, and now you've taken the plunge, you must come again."

Chris, her cardigan over her shoulders, was running toward them over the rough long grass. The sulky, mutinous look on her face had gone and she thanked Felix with airy cheerfulness.

As he left them and they walked on through the orchard, Chris put her hand through Meg's arm and said, "Thank goodness that's over. Now we can have a nice evening together, just you and me."

Meg pulled her arm away. "Did you have to speak to me like that in front of Major Palmer?" she asked. "What was wrong?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. Something upset you." Meg stood still. "It was that motorbike, wasn't it?"

Chris met her eyes with a hard blue stare. "What absolute nonsense! Who cares about a stupid old bike? Well, I'm not going to stand here arguing. I want my supper, if you don't." She walked away, across the lawn and in at the back door. Meg sighed and followed slowly. The shadow of the house cast by the setting sun stretched toward her, dark on the mowed lawn.

4

THAT night, for the first time in weeks, Meg could not sleep. At midnight she was wide awake, reliving the disturbing scene after supper.

She was back in the wing chair by the fire, Chris kneeling on the hearthrug, and the coffee tray between them. Chris had just put a cup into Meg's hand when Felix burst in, for once coatless, glaring at them accusingly and crying, "My revolver has gone!"

Startled, Meg had upset her cup. She felt again the sting on her thighs of the almost boiling coffee seeping through her thin dress.

"Look what you've done!" Chris had said furiously to Felix. "Barging in like that! Don't move, Margaret. I'll fetch a cloth."

Felix had ignored the girl as she ran past him into the hall. Advancing into the room, he said again, "My revolver has gone. That girl took it this evening when she went back to the bungalow."

"That's ridiculous! What would Chris want with a gun?"

Chris came back and wiped Meg's skirt with a cloth. "He's quite mad," she said, looking up at Meg. "Me take his gun! Why me, I ask you?" Putting the cloth down on the mantelpiece, Chris took a step toward Felix. "I'll bet your precious gun isn't really lost—you have forgotten where you put it, that's all."

Felix gave one of his snorting laughs. "Come off it, Chris," he said. "I know that you took my revolver. Give it back to me at once." And when Chris only shrugged her shoulders and turned to Meg, he seized the girl's arm and swung her around.

Meg stood up and said sharply, "How dare you, Major Palmer! Let Chris go at once. Let's talk it over like reasonable people. As for you, Chris, there's no need for rudeness. Sit down and be quiet."

Meg had done her best: pointed out that Chris had been carrying nothing when she joined them in the orchard, that the girl could not have hidden the gun under her brief dress. It had been no use. Felix had made up his mind. He said the gun was usually safely locked away, but, after bringing it back from Meg's house that early morning, he had left it, with a box of ammunition, in the bottom drawer of the chest in his bedroom. He admitted reluctantly that the laundryman and electrician had later been in the house while he was out. But when Meg said triumphantly, "Well, there you are; someone besides Chris had the opportunity to find the gun," Felix had lost his temper.

"No one except you and Chris even knew that I had a gun," he had shouted. "Use your head, woman! Can't you see that something odd is going on?"

"Don't shout at me," said Meg and, turning to Chris, "Once for all, Chris—did you take it?"

"Of course I didn't!" Chris burst into tears. "Ever since I came here, he's had it in for me, and now he'll set the police on me."

"I shall have to report that my revolver is missing," Felix said. "It would save us all a lot of trouble if you gave it back to me now."

Meg put her arm around Chris. "She has told you that she didn't touch your gun. I suggest that you go home and make a careful search."

"That girl has bewitched you. It's dangerous to be so blind. I won't go until I've made you see."

Meg blazed at him. "Get out of my house. I can only think that you have had too much to drink!"

Now, lying in bed, she wished she could unsay those words. Felix had stood looking at her while his face, which had been red with anger, stiffened and paled. Then, with a certain dignity, he had said, "Very well, I'm going. You won't see me again unless you send for me."

When Felix had gone, she had turned to Chris and looked searchingly into her face. "Chris, did you hide the gun, to tease him, perhaps? The police will be bound to question us unless it turns up."

Chris had pulled away. "I didn't. I swear to God. If you don't believe me, who will?" And throwing herself on the sofa, she had wept again. Meg had sat beside her, assuring her that of course she believed her. At last Chris had sat up and, holding out her arms to Meg, had cried, "Oh, Margaret, I do like you—you're super!" Then, with one of her

bewildering changes of mood, she had said briskly, "That's over, thank goodness. Now I'm going to make you some hot milk. You're looking dreadfully tired." And she had bustled off to the kitchen.

The tumbler of milk, almost untasted, was still on the bedside table where Chris had set it. Meg had not wanted it. She sat up and looked at her clock: a quarter to two. It was no use lying here any longer; better to go downstairs, reheat the milk, and read a few pages before trying to sleep again. She put on her dressing gown, picked up the tumbler, went to the door, and turned the knob. The door would not open. Putting the glass back on the table, spilling milk because her hand was shaking, Meg used both hands on the knob. The door was locked from outside, because there was no sign of the key.

At once the dread and familiar suffocation was in her throat, and Meg panicked as she had done one day years ago when she had been stuck in a crammed elevator for an hour. She hammered at the door and called, "Chris! Chris!" Then she listened; the house was silent.

Whirling around, she ran to the telephone, but as she picked up the receiver the door opened and Chris stood there, yawning, her blue dressing gown unfastened, staring at Meg with sleepy amazement.

"What on earth's the matter?" Chris demanded.

Meg collapsed on the bed and cried, "Oh, Chris! I thought you would never hear me. The door was locked."

"It wasn't locked," Chris said flatly.

"It was, on the outside. I couldn't see the key. Never do that to me again, Chris. I can't stand being shut in."

Chris gave her a hard cold look and frowned. "I didn't lock you in, Margaret. Why should I?" She turned and bent down. Standing up again, she held out the key. "There you are," she said. "It was lying on the carpet in the corridor. No one locked you in, Margaret. Poor darling, you must have been dreaming." In the blue eyes was the dancing merriment that Meg had seen before. "Look, you haven't touched your milk. I'll heat it up again for you. If you had drunk it before, you would have slept like a log, no nightmares."

Meg lay down against the pillows. "Leave the door open," she said, and closed her eyes, listening to the soft footsteps descending the stairs. Why should Chris want to lock her in her room?

With a start, Meg opened her eyes to see Chris standing beside her

bed. "You were asleep again already," Chris told her gently. "But come on, drink this up. It's getting on for three, you old silly."

When Meg held out the empty tumbler, Chris said, "Would you like me to stay with you for a little?"

Meg smiled and touched Chris's hand. "You're a kind child, sometimes. No, you run along. I'm all right now." The door closed.

Meg turned off the light and lay frowning into the darkness, remembering the motorbike, the lost gun, the locked door—three odd happenings in one day. Turning over in bed, she tried to think. She had not been dreaming, so why had Chris locked her in? Why? Why?

Sleep came while she was searching for an answer.

A DELUGE began just before dawn. Two days later it was still raining. A coldness crept through the old house and the hall reeked with damp.

As Meg dressed she looked out at the gray skies. At least in London they could go everywhere by taxi. The day had been planned as a kind of apology to Chris. Meg had made an appointment with Mr. Danby, her lawyer, and had arranged luncheon and a play with Ida Rogers, a friend who had a daughter of Chris's age.

It was time Chris met some young people; she was becoming far too much of a stay-at-home. Meg had decided that while she was closeted with Mr. Danby, Chris should do some shopping. After the theater they would all go somewhere for drinks and sandwiches before Meg and Chris caught the seven fifteen home. Mrs. Dawlish was to see that a special cold supper would be waiting for them: salmon, strawberries, and a bottle of hock.

Meg tidied her room. There would not be much time after breakfast if they were to catch the nine forty. She hoped that Chris was dressed. Last night the child had seemed listless, withdrawn, and Meg had wondered if she had been upset by the visit from the police.

The solemn young constable had seen Meg alone first, asking just a few questions and writing the address of Chris's father in his notebook. Then, in front of Meg, he had talked to Chris. She had told him simply, without nervousness or the hostility Meg had feared, that she had not touched the gun and knew nothing about the motorbike. When Meg had asked him what would happen next, he had said there were several lines of inquiry to follow.

Now, as Meg hurried down the corridor, Chris's door opened and she appeared in her nightgown. "Margaret, I'm feeling awful. I've got such a headache. I think I'm getting flu." In the whining voice Meg so much disliked, she said, "I'm aching all over. I must go back to bed."

Meg pushed the girl gently into the room, which was in its usual disheveled state. She had transformed Philip's old room into one for a girl. There were white rugs, and a dressing table with a muslin frill. Chris had taken Philip's belongings up to the attic.

"Must you leave your clothes on the floor?" Meg asked as she picked up the dress Chris had worn last night. She turned toward the girl. "You're shivering, Chris. You must have caught a chill. What a shame!"

"I shan't be able to go," Chris wailed. "And I was so looking forward to it. But you must go," she said as she got back into bed. "Everything's arranged and your Mrs. Rogers would be so disappointed."

"I wouldn't dream of leaving you here alone and ill."

"I've only got a cold. Mrs. Dawlish will be here this morning and I'll sleep all afternoon. I'll be really ill if you don't go."

Meg hesitated, thinking of Mr. Danby. "I could come back after lunch," she said. "I would be back then about four."

"Oh no. Promise me you'll stay for the theater and catch the seven fifteen. I won't rest until you do." Chris began to cry.

Alarmed by this vehemence, Meg said, "Very well. There's no need to get in such a state."

"You'll enjoy yourself and do everything you planned? I'm safe as houses here."

Meg smiled down at Chris as she said, "I'll do my best to enjoy myself, but it won't be easy without you."

Holding her umbrella against the rain, Meg hurried to the garage. At the gate she looked back. The house, solid and pink-walled under the old slate roof, stood between its surrounding beech hedges, as it had for centuries. How could she have seen it as out of date? It seemed to her now serene and wise, confident of lasting forever. "Safe as houses," Chris had said. If any house were safe, surely this one was?

IT WAS still raining when Meg came back. No smoke was rising from the chimneys, which meant that Chris had not lit a fire and was probably still in bed. It was unlikely that she had heard the car arrive, as her

room looked over the back garden. Would she be pleased to see Meg back so early—it was only half past four—or would she be annoyed?

All through luncheon Meg had been haunted by the thought that the police, having pursued their inquiries, might come again and find the girl alone. As she tried to hold her umbrella, the bag of grapes and the magazines she had bought for Chris, and, at the same time, to find her key in her bag, she rehearsed a little guiltily what she would say: "I know I have broken my promise, Chris, but I wouldn't have enjoyed the theater without you."

Meg closed the front door behind her, set her umbrella against it to drip on the mat, and put her bag on the chest at the foot of the stairs. She was reminded of that other afternoon, more than three weeks ago, when she had come back from London. There was no ringing of the telephone to greet her now, only a brooding silence. The hall, with the rain streaming down the windows, was even darker than usual.

Carrying her placatory gifts, she hurried upstairs. Chris's bed was empty; her dressing gown was gone from its usual chair.

Meg went down the corridor. Chris must be in the kitchen, perhaps making herself a cup of tea. Meg might have called out, "Chris? I'm back." But the silence of the house imposed an answering silence on her. Feeling like an intruder, she entered her room.

Someone had closed the curtains. The bedside lamp was on and the room was full of a rosy glow. Meg stood in the doorway, staring at her bed, the big double bed in which she and Jocelyn had slept.

The sight of the two lying there in the dewy abandoned sleep that follows love did not at first outrage her. The boy's bare arm lay across the girl's naked shoulders; their heads, one fair, the other a reddish brown, were turned to each other on the pillow. Meg could only think, in numbed astonishment, how young and beautiful they were. The bag of grapes and the magazines slipped from her grasp, the sound of their fall shockingly loud in that charmed silence. The girl sat up and with a swift, instinctive movement snatched her dressing gown from the foot of the bed and put it on.

"You promised!" She spat the words at Meg. "You promised!"

Unable to look away from the bed, Meg reached for the doorknob.

"Oh no, you don't," Chris said and, bounding up, pulled her roughly inside, slammed the door, locked it, and took out the key.

Meg, as if released from a spell, sank down on the nearest chair. "That's right," Chris said. "Don't you move, or you'll be sorry."

The boy was now propped on one elbow and regarding Meg with a sleepy, almost benevolent look. Perhaps it was the broad, flat forehead and the light, indifferent eyes, as much as the mane of shoulder-length hair, that brought the image of a lion to Meg's mind. The muscles moved along his wide shoulders as he swung his legs to the floor and pulled on a pair of jeans. For all his size, he did not look much older than Chris—seventeen, perhaps eighteen.

"So now you know," said Chris. "What are you going to do?"

Meg found her voice at last. "My room, our bed . . ."

Chris smiled at her, a thin-lipped smile that showed her teeth. "This is the only decent-sized bed in the house, isn't it? Those first nights, before you came back, we slept here."

"Who is this boy?" Meg said in bewilderment. "Does he come from the village? Have I seen him before?"

Chris laughed. "Not likely! I took good care you didn't see him! This is Roy Halloran, my Roy, and he's been here all the time."

Trying to pull herself together, Meg said, "How could anyone be in this house for weeks without my knowing it?"

"Roy was in the attic, too, when you and old Palmer found me there. When we knew that you were coming back, Roy wanted to go, but I made him see that we wouldn't have a hope, with him so lame. He'd messed his ankle up when the bike went into the ditch."

"The motorbike! So that's how you came here!" Looking past Chris, Meg said to Roy, "You had better go before I call the police."

He stared at her as if he did not understand and, reaching for a sweater at the foot of the bed, drew it over his head. It was a dark blue pullover that Meg had knitted for Philip years ago. "That's not yours," she said angrily. "Take it off at once."

"A nerve you've got talking to Roy like that!" Chris said, beside herself with fury. "You've got more to worry about than an old sweater. You've gone and spoiled it all, you silly old bag. I could kill you!"

Appalled by the look on Chris's face, Meg shrank back in the chair. Roy, without raising his voice, said, "Shut your trap, Chris." He limped on bare feet to the window and dragged the curtains apart. Opening the window, he leaned out, lifting his face to the rain.

"Get away from there," Chris yelled. "Don't show yourself at the window. That nosey parker is always about with his dogs." She rushed across the room and tried to drag him back. "Do you want to be caught? After all the trouble I've taken!"

He shook himself free of her, as a dog might shake off an enraged kitten, and made for the door. When he found it locked, he scowled and held out his hand for the key.

"No, Roy," Chris said. "If you go downstairs without me, you'll do something silly, like going out while it's still light. Please, be good a little longer. Perhaps there'll be something in the papers tomorrow."

He limped over to the bed and sat there as if in pain, his face in his hands. At once Chris was beside him, holding his head against her breast. "It's all right," she crooned. "I won't let them find you."

Meg would not have thought it possible that Chris could speak with such tenderness, or that the small, sharp face could be so softened. Then Chris lifted her head and said in a very different voice, "Come on, Roy, get a hold on yourself. What are we going to do about her?"

Two pairs of inimical, cold eyes were fixed on Meg. For the first time it occurred to her that she should be afraid. But she knew that she must not show fear, and she forced herself to stand up and walk past them to her dressing table, sit down with her back to them, and take off her hat. As she combed her hair she said steadily, "What have you two been up to? What has Roy done?"

"You'd know if you read the papers properly," Chris said. "It was all there on the front page, and on the radio too. I keep telling Roy that they're all in it together, even if he drove the van—"

"Keep your flipping mouth shut, can't you?" Roy said.

"What does it matter now? Why shouldn't I tell her?"

"I don't want to hear it, that's why."

Turning around on the stool to face them, Meg said, "Chris, you must tell me. What has your Roy done?"

"*I'm* not telling you," Chris jeered. "You heard what Roy said."

"Very well." Meg looked at her watch. "It's five o'clock. I want some tea." She stood up and held her hand out as Roy had done. "Give me that key, Chris, and then go and dress."

Chris laughed again, a hoarse little crow. "Chris, do that, Chris, fetch that. I'm the one that gives the orders now."

"Oh, come on, Chris, open up like she says." Roy limped across to the door again. "I've had enough of being stuck up here. Let her out to get tea for us. We can watch her doing it, can't we?"

After a moment's hesitation, Chris took the key out of her dressing-gown pocket and gave it to him. "Promise not to go near the windows," she called as he went down the corridor, leaving the door open.

As Meg moved in another direction, Chris whipped around. "Hi! What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm only going to the bathroom."

"You're not going anywhere alone. Roy! Come back. There's a window in the bathroom. Stop her, Roy."

"You're being ridiculous, Chris." Meg gave the girl a push that sent her staggering back and, before Roy could reappear, walked into the bathroom, slammed the door, and locked it.

From the window she could see across the orchard to the roof of Felix Palmer's bungalow. But he would never hear her if she shouted for help. It would be possible to squeeze through the window and, at the risk of breaking an ankle, drop down onto the flagged path below; but Meg had no intention of doing anything so drastic. If she kept her head and waited, she could give Chris the slip. The boy, alarming as she found him, seemed dull-witted and slow.

As Meg washed her hands, taking her time, she could hear agitated voices. She turned the key gently and flung the door back, startling them, as she had meant to do. Following up her advantage, she walked straight past them down the corridor.

Chris, close behind her, said, "Go straight to the kitchen. If you know what's good for you, just do what you're told."

If a stranger, standing outside in the rain, had been able to see through the kitchen curtains, he would have noticed only a family party—mother, son, and daughter, perhaps—about to have a substantial high tea of boiled eggs, ham, bread and butter, and jam.

Chris and Roy sat at the table watching everything Meg did, and her usual deftness deserted her, leaving her all thumbs. At last everything was ready, and she sat down opposite them and poured the tea. "You're not eating anything," Chris said to Meg after a while, and pushed the plate of bread and butter toward her.

"I'm not hungry, only thirsty."

"Surely you can manage a nice ladylike slice of bread and butter."

"Oh, leave her alone, can't you?" It was the first time Roy had spoken since they came into the kitchen. He reached for a slice and crammed it into his mouth.

Lifting her cup, Meg studied him cautiously over the rim as she drank. His face was handsome, in a heavy blurred way, as if it had been modeled roughly in clay and left unfinished. The mouth, with its rather thick, soft lips, was especially vague above a heavy chin. It seemed to Meg a stupid face, but not vicious.

He must have sensed that he was being watched, for he glanced up uneasily. His eyes were slightly bloodshot, and so pale a blue that they looked blind, vacant. Meg looked quickly away.

Chris carried his cup around the table for Meg to refill. "How did you manage to feed him all that time, Chris?" Meg asked.

"I managed," Chris said. "You were only too glad for me to do your shopping, weren't you? Your bills will be rather large this month. Luckily you never noticed when leftovers went from the larder. Mrs. Dawlish noticed, but she thought I'd wolfed them myself." Setting Roy's cup down, Chris put her hand on his shoulder in a brief caress. "Poor Roy, he likes his food and I had to keep him short for his own sake. Stuck up there all day and not able to move about much when he came down at nights, it wouldn't have done for him to eat a lot."

"And you didn't mind thieving, lying, cheating?" The words came out before Meg could stop them.

Chris raised her eyebrows as if Meg had said something outrageously foolish. "Of course I didn't mind. There's nothing I wouldn't do for Roy." The look she gave him was one of open adoration.

"It made no difference that I took you into my home, when I might have turned you over to the police? I have done a lot for you, Chris, and I would have done more."

Chris looked at her with weary scorn. "You didn't do it for *me*. You did it for quite another girl, the one you wanted me to be. . . ."

Roy cut her short. "I've finished," he announced, pushing his plate away. He picked up Meg's bag, which he had found on the chest, and turned the contents out onto the table. Her gold compact was handed to Chris, who put it in the pocket of her dressing gown. The notes and

silver he counted and stowed away in the back pocket of his jeans. Everything else, except for the car keys, was swept back into the bag. "What sort of a car have you got?" he said to Meg.

"It's a BMW 2002," Meg said. "Rather special."

"Is it fast?"

"Extremely fast, on the right roads."

Looking past her at Chris, he said, "Good."

Suddenly he put one large foot on the table. Meg stared at it unbelievingly, until the pent-up frustration of the last few hours exploded into rage and she cried, "Take your disgusting foot off my table at once, you great oaf! How dare you behave like this in my house?"

Roy looked at her in astonishment, but before he could obey, as he seemed about to do, Chris slapped her across the cheek. "That'll teach you to call Roy names. *Your* house? Can't you understand that we've taken it over?" She sat down and said more quietly, "It's your fault. If you hadn't broken your promise this afternoon, you and I would have been just as we were and you would have woken up one morning to find that I'd gone, and you'd have never known why."

Meg's face burned. "Why don't you go, now that I know? Take the car, take anything you want, but get out of my sight."

"She's right." Roy took his foot from the table and levered himself up from the chair. "Come on, Chris, let's beat it."

"And how far would we get?" She watched him anxiously as he prowled from the door to the windows and back. "Oh, Roy—we've been through all this. You know very well that our best chance is to lie low for as long as we can. The setup here is just what we need."

"Until they get one of the others and he talks."

"It hasn't happened yet, has it? Wait until it all cools down." She put her arms around him. "It'll be better, now that we don't have to worry about her knowing. You can move about more."

He pushed Chris away. "And what do we do with her? Have you thought that one out, smarty?"

Again Meg met their calculating stares. Chris said slowly, "We can't keep her locked up. She must be about in the house as usual, in case anyone comes. One of us must stay near her to see she behaves."

"It won't work," he said. "If anyone came, while you were out or not, she's only got to shout to that person to fetch the police."

"Not if you had the gun, stupid. Where is it now?" He looked around vaguely and Chris said, "Oh, Roy, you must have left it in the bedroom. You'd better get it now."

Meg cried, "Felix was right! You did take his gun, Chris."

"Of course I did. When I went back for my cardigan. I put it in the hedge by his gate and fetched it that night. Go on, Roy, get it."

"Stop badgering me, can't you?" Roy turned away from Chris, hunching his shoulders defensively.

"Listen to me, you two!" Meg said urgently. "What about Mrs. Dawlish? She will be here at nine tomorrow, and every day except Sunday. She will notice that something is wrong. You can hardly follow her round all day with a gun! And I may as well point out that if she weren't home at her usual time, her husband would be here at once."

"You'll have to give her the sack tomorrow. You can say that you've found some money missing."

"Don't be silly, Chris. Mrs. Dawlish and I have known each other for years. Do you think she wouldn't see through that?"

"Then I'll have to think of something else for Mrs. Dawlish." Chris moved toward the door. "Now, Meg," she said. "Oh, I forgot, it's Margaret, isn't it? You wash up. Roy will see you don't get into mischief while I go upstairs and dress."

It did not take Meg long to clear the table. Roy took no notice of her as he slouched in a chair, smoking and staring at the floor. When she began to wash the dishes she realized that she was making as little noise as possible, as if she feared to disturb a wild animal, well fed, drowsy, acquiescent for the moment. She found it difficult to believe that Roy must have done something shady and dangerous. He was not her idea of the criminal type; he seemed too stolid and slow.

As Meg hung up the dishcloth a ring at the front door brought Roy to his feet. Meg was as startled as he. She should, she supposed, have shouted for help, but he lunged across the room at her and, before she could make a sound, clamped a hand over her mouth. The hand, smelling of tobacco and warm damp flesh, was stifling, and it pressed her upper lip painfully against her teeth. Roy's steely arm held her against his chest; she could feel the thumping of his heart and knew that he was more afraid than she.

Chris pounded down the stairs. Meg heard her open the front

door and her voice answering a woman's voice. Then the door was slammed, the bolt rammed home.

Heels tapped along the passage. Chris, in a very short dress and a white cardigan, walked into the room. Her face was flushed and angry. "You can let her go now, Roy," she said. Roy released Meg, who sat down, rubbing her numbed chin and lips.

Chris said, "Of all things! A woman collecting money for the new village hall. Mrs. Jensen. Is she a friend of yours, Meg?"

Meg shook her head. Mrs. Jensen was a tall, smart, public-spirited woman who was a power in the village—an elegant busybody, Jocelyn had called her.

"A real nosey parker," Chris went on. "Why would she come out on an evening like this? She asked to see you but I said you were lying down with a bad headache. I told her you'd post the money—and you'd better do it tomorrow, Meg, or she'll be back."

Roy held the curtains apart and looked out at the rain. "What's the matter?" Chris said to his back. "Did Meg try to call out? Next time just show her your knife."

"A knife?" Meg said wearily. "I might have known it."

Roy rolled up the leg of his jeans. Strapped to his calf was a knife, which he pulled from its sheath and held out.

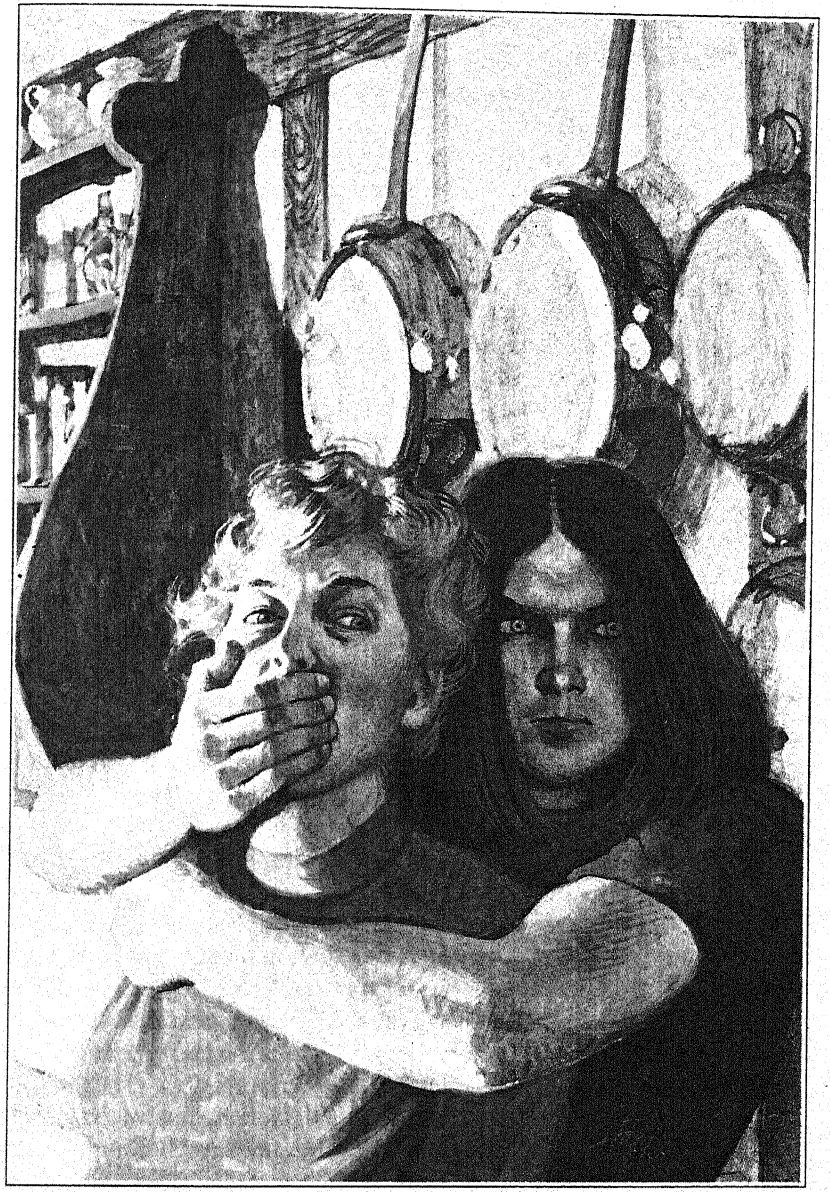
"It's sharp, see?" Chris said. "And nice and handy."

Meg managed to smile—scornfully, she hoped. "What a melodramatic pair you are! Guns, knives—it's illegal to possess a knife, isn't it? If it's found on you, Roy, you'll be in trouble."

For some reason this appeared to amuse him. He glanced at Chris, and they both began to laugh. The laughter was unnaturally shrill, and they clung together, overcome with mounting hysteria. Meg was not surprised to see, when Chris raised her head from the boy's shoulder, that her face was streaming with tears.

"Oh Roy! Oh Roy!" she sobbed. Then she pushed him gently away and said, "Let's go into the sitting room, light the fire, and turn on the telly. Later we'll have that salmon. There's a bottle of wine, too, and strawberries. Let's enjoy ourselves, for this night anyway." Chris put her arm around Roy's waist and drew him toward the door.

For the moment they had forgotten Meg. She had only to move silently to the back door and get away through the orchard. . . . But



suddenly, as she watched them, her own eyes filled with tears. Here were two desperate young creatures, frightened, unhappy, needing help. She saw Chris grope for Roy's hand as they went down the passage. Lost children, children in the dark, always hold hands.

As Meg hesitated, Chris turned her head. A moment of pity, of weakness, and Meg had missed her chance.

Chris dropped Roy's hand and came toward her. "Come on," she said roughly and gave Meg a push. "You were going to make a bolt for it, weren't you? You wouldn't have got far!"

5

WHEN she woke just before dawn, Meg wondered why the glimmer of the windows was on the wrong side of the bed. Then she remembered that she was on the single bed in Jocelyn's dressing room, with a blanket thrown over her. Her head ached and there was an unpleasant taste in her mouth, and her wrists were tied with her own scarves.

They had half dragged, half carried her upstairs at the end of that dreadful evening. Chris had been in a fever of hurry to be alone with Roy. She had pulled Meg's dress roughly over her head and had let her take off her stockings and garter belt before pushing her down on the bed. Roy had closed and latched the windows.

Chris should not have forced her to swallow so many sleeping pills on top of the whisky and wine they had made her drink. "Do you want to kill me?" Meg had cried, and at that Roy had seized the pillbox.

"Three's enough," he had said, his voice hoarse with alarm.

"But she's been having them for weeks. Suppose they don't work? Suppose she wakes up and screams?"

"The windows are shut, and anyway, she won't scream twice."

As heavy, drugged sleep had descended on her, Meg had vaguely remembered her nights of deep sleep after Chris had given her those glasses of hot milk. It was then, while she lay unconscious behind the locked door, that Roy must have come down from the attic to stretch his large frame, to walk and smoke in the dark orchard.

He and Chris had spent the evening on the sofa in front of the television set, watching the screen between bouts of what she supposed was still called necking. At first Meg had sat quietly in the wing chair; then,

unable to stand the sight of them any longer, thinking that a drink might help her, she had gone to the wine cooler and taken out the bottle of whisky and a siphon. As she had started toward the kitchen to fetch a glass, Chris had said, "Hi! Where do you think you're going? Drink out of one of those old cups of yours." She had pointed to the corner cupboard where Meg kept her grandmother's Worcester china. "And, while you're at it, I'll have a whisky too."

As she had put the filled cup into the girl's hand she had said, "Be careful of that cup, won't you? It's nearly two hundred years old."

Chris had gulped the whisky down, pulled a face, and said, "This old cup's lasted long enough, don't you think so, Roy?" and had tossed it over her shoulder, smashing it against the wall. Then she leaned back, flushed and laughing, against Roy's arm.

From that moment the evening had become a nightmare that Meg could remember only in flashes: loading the cart with the cold supper while Chris, holding Roy's knife, pretended with terrifying playfulness to threaten her, once going so far as to prick her arm.

Meg had been astonished to find that she was hungry, and had helped herself from the cart. Roy had pulled the cork from the wine bottle, but had refused even to taste the wine. "Stick to your old beer, then," Chris had said, drinking some wine and holding the bottle up to the light. "Pity to waste all this," she had said. "Margaret must finish it." When Meg had shaken her head, Chris had jumped up and pressed the glass to her lips, insisting that not a drop be wasted.

The unaccustomed whisky and wine must have gone to Chris's head and the girl had been wildly elated, leaping about with quick, jerky movements and refilling Meg's glass. To give in must have seemed the only thing to do; Meg remembered Chris waving the empty bottle triumphantly. Then Chris, suddenly tired of baiting Meg, had turned her attention to Roy, pummeling him and laughing like a lunatic. Meg could still see Roy's arms going out to draw the overexcited girl down onto the sofa in a large, soothing embrace. She had seen Chris arch her back, press her body against his; had seen his hand slide under the blue skirt. Then Chris had looked up and, above the boy's head, had smiled at her—a wicked, knowing, triumphant smile. Meg had been sure that if Chris had had her way, she, Meg, would have been forced to witness the complete act of love.

But Roy had suddenly pushed Chris away. "Not here," Meg had heard him say. "If you want it that badly, you can come upstairs."

As he reached the door, Chris called, "Wait—we can't go up yet, Roy. We can't leave her here."

When they had pulled Meg up from the chair, she had staggered with exhaustion and her head had reeled. Then Chris had said, "We can't leave the room in this mess for Mrs. D. to find—she mustn't see that three of everything has been used."

Meg had been left sitting in the hall while Chris had rushed about with angry efficiency, rattling the cart down the passage, sweeping up the broken china. The chill of the hall, the steady ticking of the clock, had brought Meg back to herself. The front door was only a few yards away—if only she could summon up strength to reach it. But as she pushed herself up, Chris had come hurrying into the hall with Roy. Chris, complaining at Meg's slowness, had forced her up the stairs with an arm as unyielding as a steel bar.

Now the darkness was pressing against Meg's face, stifling her, and yet to turn to the gray oblongs of the windows was only to be reminded that they were latched, that she was shut into this room. She turned and twisted on the bed, struggling to free her hands. It was no use—and her bound feet were fastened to the bottom rail of the old-fashioned brass bedstead with the cord of her dressing gown.

Meg turned her back on the windows. "Think of something else," Jocelyn had always said when she had been overcome by claustrophobia. "You needn't let it get the better of you." And when he was there she had usually managed to control herself. Now she clung to the thought of him as if that could help her, until sleep enveloped her again.

"WAKE up, Meg, wake up at once!" Chris was bending over her, shaking her, telling her to show some sign of life. "You gave us ever such a fright," she scolded. "We thought you were dead."

Reluctantly, Meg tried to sit up, still giddy with sleep. The room was full of morning sunshine; the rain must have stopped sometime in the night. "Why should you care?" Her voice was hoarse, and she leaned back and closed her eyes again.

"Why? Because Mrs. Dawlish will be here in half an hour. I've de-

cided you're going to be in bed with a bad cold, that you caught from me." Chris untied Meg's hands and feet. "Stand," she commanded.

When the girl pulled her up, the room spun around Meg and she nearly fell. "I feel awful. I must have an aspirin and a bath."

"You look awful, all right," Chris said. "Mrs. Dawlish will be ever so sorry that you're poorly. I'll give you an aspirin, but there isn't time for a bath. After Mrs. Dawlish has gone home, we'll see."

Chris, in her jeans and shirt, her hair in its ponytail, looked about fourteen, dewy and fresh, showing no sign of the past evening. Her small, unkind hand steered Meg to the bathroom. "Hurry up and wash, and then put on this nightgown. No, I won't go away; I'm staying right here."

The shock of cold water on her face cleared Meg's head. She peered at the mirror as she hastily brushed her teeth. There were dark patches under her puffed-up eyes and she was very pale, but otherwise she looked much as she always did. She was shivering and the touch of the thin nightgown was chill on her body.

"You'd better comb your hair." Chris pushed Meg into her own bedroom and toward the dressing table. As she sat down and fumbled with her comb, she saw that Roy was standing at the window. He did not turn around as Chris said, "That will do, Meg—get into bed."

Meg stood up, took a step toward the bed, and stopped. "You must change the sheets," she said. "Nothing will make me get into that bed."

"We'll see about that. Come here, Roy."

"I don't care what you do to me, but I won't budge until you have changed those sheets." Meg clung to the dressing table as if it were an anchor. Roy was beside her, and she shrank away from him.

"Go on," he said to Chris. "Do what she says."

"But Roy . . ." Chris began, and then moved slowly toward the door. "Mrs. Dawlish will be here any minute now."

"Go on, it'll be quicker in the end."

He waited beside Meg, so close that she could hear him breathing, and she did not dare to move or even look around. The clock on her bedside table showed that it was nearly nine. Outside the house, everyday life was going on. The postman must be making his rounds. Mrs. Dawlish, having pushed her bicycle up the steep hill halfway to the village, must be approaching the back gate. Before long the milkman

in his rattling van would follow her. Through the open window came the scent of rain-washed leaves in the sun, of roses, of a fine day in June. And here she stood, desolate, helpless.

Chris, carrying clean linen, hurried into the room, moving with angry, jerky speed. "Give me a hand, can't you?" she snarled at Meg.

Meg tucked in the sheets, listening, as she knew Chris was listening, for any sound from the rooms below. When Chris said, "There—hop in and lie down," Meg obeyed at once and lay watching Chris set the room in order, pulling the curtains across the windows.

"Remember, this is a nasty kind of cold, flu almost," Chris told Meg, "and you must tell Mrs. Dawlish that she mustn't come too close. I can hear her in the kitchen. Hurry up, Roy."

Roy walked toward the big wall closet where Meg's coats and dresses hung. Meg sat up in consternation as she saw that he had the gun. "What are you going to do with that?" she cried.

"Hush! Nothing will happen if you behave yourself," Chris said, beside her. "Roy's going to be in the closet, with the door open a crack. If you say or do anything you shouldn't, Mrs. Dawlish might get hurt."

"He wouldn't dare!"

Chris leaned closer and whispered, "Listen. Roy may seem slow and quiet, but don't be fooled. He's a killer." Then, raising her voice, she said, "I'm going to fetch your coffee. Just lie there and be good."

The door closed and Meg lay still, trying not to watch the closet. One white paneled door was slightly open, revealing nothing except a strip of darkness. Unable to stand upright, was Roy sitting on the floor, or was he kneeling? Mrs. Dawlish would not leave until half past twelve. How long would he endure it?

"Roy," she said softly, "can you breathe?"

The dark crack widened and something small and round and gleaming pointed directly at her. It was the muzzle of the gun.

Meg shut her eyes again, and when she opened them many minutes later, the gun had been withdrawn and Chris was carrying a tray into the room. As Meg sat up, Chris put it on her knees. With its large pot of coffee, pile of toast in a napkin, honey, butter, and glass of orange juice, all neatly arranged on a clean cloth, it might have been carried up by a loving and solicitous daughter.

Chris buttered a slice of toast and, opening the closet, gave it to Roy.

He was kneeling among Meg's shoes and she was glad to see that he looked extremely uncomfortable.

"Mrs. D. will be up any moment," Chris told him. She gave him a cup of coffee. "Drink that, and give the cup back to me. I could do with some coffee too."

She sat down on the bed and said, "Now listen, Meg. When Mrs. D. comes up, tell her to do something that will keep her in the kitchen for a good long time—turn out the larder or something."

"She'll think it odd. Thursday is her bedroom day."

"You're ill, aren't you? Tell her that you couldn't stand the sound of the vacuum cleaner. And make it good and convincing."

There was a tap on the bedroom door, and Chris just had time to push the closet door to and perch herself on the bed again before Mrs. Dawlish, carrying a vase of roses, advanced into the room.

Meg managed to say, "Better not to come close, Mrs. Dawlish. I've got a dreadful cold." It was all she could do not to look at the closet.

Mrs. Dawlish halted halfway across the room and Chris hurried to take the vase from her. "Do you really want all the curtains drawn on such a lovely day, Mrs. Starr? The sun would do you good."

"Her head is so bad, poor thing," Chris began, but Mrs. Dawlish marched to the windows and pulled the curtains back.

"I know Mrs. Starr better than you do, Chris. Bad head or not, she wouldn't want to lie here with the day shut out. Mrs. Starr, you do look proper poorly. Shall I give Dr. MacArthur a ring?"

What would happen if Meg said yes? Mrs. Dawlish was standing exactly opposite the slightly open closet door. "It's only a bad cold," Meg said quickly. "I wish you wouldn't come so close. Your husband wouldn't thank you for handing this cold on to him."

"He must take his chances. Shall I make your bed?"

"I've made it," Chris said.

Mrs. Dawlish gave the girl a disparaging glance. "*You* look very perky today. What about the flu you had yesterday? Passed it on, it seems." She turned to the bed. "Sure you're comfortable, Mrs. Starr?"

Looking up at the broad, plain face she knew so well, Meg was overcome by a devastating sense of helplessness. If only she could convey some unspoken message to Mrs. Dawlish that would send her safely out of the house, perhaps to fetch help. It was, of course, impossible. "I'm

very comfortable; don't worry about me," she said, trying to smile.

"Well, I'll just see to the room then—give it a dust."

Chris, standing behind Mrs. Dawlish, was shaking her head. With an effort, Meg said, "There's something else I would like you to do, Mrs. Dawlish. Please give the larder a good turnout."

"It's my day for the bedrooms." Mrs. Dawlish, her face like a thundercloud, was staring straight at the closet. Had the door moved?

In a panic, Meg sat up straight and pushed the tray away, upsetting the coffeepot. "Oh, please do what I ask," she cried. "My head is aching. If you use the vacuum upstairs you'll only disturb me."

Mrs. Dawlish said stiffly, "Very well, I'm sure, madam," and marched out the door, which she closed with exaggerated care.

"You did that very nicely," Chris said as she picked up the coffeepot. "Roy, you can come out and have a stretch."

Meg fell back, overcome with relief as well as with despair. How foolish to hope that Mrs. Dawlish would sense that something was wrong, that there was danger in the air.

Roy was at the window again, looking out, as he always seemed driven to do. Frowning, Chris said, "I'm going downstairs now, Roy. You must get back in that closet."

He turned and scowled at her. "Not on your life."

"I'm afraid you must. Mrs. Dawlish might pop up here again." Chris went to him, pleading, coaxing, pressing against him. Meg saw the boy's sullen, mutinous face relax. What was there in Chris, in that scrawny body and that unformed mind, that gave her this power over him?

Chris gave him a long kiss, then pushed him away and picked up Meg's tray. Halfway to the door, she turned and came back to the bed. "Where's the garage key?"

"It's on the chest in the hall," Meg said. Then she sat up and cried, "Why do you want it? Oh, Chris, are you going?"

Chris laughed unkindly. "Poor old Meg! Sorry to disappoint you, but we aren't. And never you mind why I want the key." She paused in the doorway and said loudly, "Try to have a nice sleep. I won't be long." The door shut and Meg heard Roy cursing softly as he settled himself into the closet. Then silence descended on the room.

In it she heard the dachshunds barking as Felix Palmer took them

out for their morning walk across the field. If only she had not offended him! He had mistrusted Chris from the first and would have come to the house every day to keep an eye on her. Everything Meg had done since Jocelyn's death had played into Chris's hands. She had cut herself off, using Jocelyn's long illness and death as an excuse, from all those kindly people who had asked her to their homes. It was unlikely that anyone, except tradesmen, would come to the house; she usually telephoned orders, and no one would be surprised if she did not show herself in the village for weeks on end.

She must do something before it was too late. Today was Thursday; Gregory worked in the garden on Thursday afternoons. Was there something she could do to attract his attention? Could she manage to write a note, then throw it out onto the lawn without Chris's knowing?

A bee drifting in through the window was making a drowsy hum. The warm, sunny room was wonderfully silent and peaceful; if Meg were not careful, she would be obeying Chris's command to sleep. . . .

When, roused by voices, she opened her eyes, she saw that Chris and Roy were standing near the foot of her bed. Chris handed something to Roy and went with him to the door. As he slipped out into the corridor she heard Chris say, "Be careful." Then Chris began to wander around the room, obviously tense.

"Suppose Roy runs into Mrs. Dawlish?" Meg said.

"He won't. Mrs. Dawlish is busy with the larder."

"What has he done with that gun?"

"It's here on the dressing table, so you behave. He's got the knife."

Meg sat up. "Oh, Chris! What is he going to do?"

Chris flung herself down in the armchair. "Do be quiet, Meg. He'll be back soon."

Meg stared at the door, as Chris was doing, and listened, for what she did not know. Her clock showed that it was a quarter to twelve.

"Chris," she said uncertainly, but Chris was on her feet again. The door opened and Roy walked in, breathing heavily, as if he had been running. He nodded at Chris, then said, "That bloody screwdriver you gave me's no use. Lucky I found another in the garage."

"Well, it's my turn now," Chris said. "I'll be back up here when Mrs. Dawlish comes to see Meg before she goes home. Poor Roy—in you go! Don't forget the gun. With luck, this will be the last time."

"It had better be."

Chris laughed, pushed the closet door to, and was gone. Meg thought she heard the front door open and close. What could Roy have been doing in the garage? Why had Chris said, "It's my turn now"?

It seemed a long time before she heard Chris on the stairs again. Mrs. Dawlish, carrying her bag, followed the girl into the room. Still on her dignity, she said, "Well, I'm off now, Mrs. Starr. You should order some food today. There's not much of the salmon left. . . ."

"Don't worry," Meg said. "I don't want anything at present. I'll tell Chris when I do."

"Very well, I'm sure," said Mrs. Dawlish in her offended tone, but, turning to leave the room, she relented. "Take care of yourself, Mrs. Starr, dear. If you need me, give me a ring. I'd bicycle over like a shot."

Mrs. Dawlish usually managed to have the last word, but seldom such an appropriate one. Meg managed to say, "Thank you—until tomorrow then," in a convincingly weak voice.

It was not until Chris, who had followed Mrs. Dawlish from the room, came back and said, "You can come out, Roy; I watched her bicycle out of the back gate," that Meg realized that every nerve and muscle in her body had been stiff with dread all morning.

Roy left the closet and put the gun on the dressing table. Lifting Chris off her feet, he whirled her around, sending the ponytail flying. Both were laughing their loud, shrill laughter. He set Chris down and she turned to Meg. "Go into the bathroom and get dressed," she said. "I've put your slacks and shirt in there and everything you need. Leave the door open. Then you can get us some lunch."

As she started to obey, Meg said, "Are you going to keep me in bed every day except Sundays? I can't have a cold forever!"

Chris and Roy smiled at each other as if sharing a joke. "With luck, there'll be no need to keep you in bed, Meg," Chris said. "Something tells me that poor Mrs. Dawlish is going to have an accident."

6

MEG's wrist was still sore from Roy's grasp. "An accident?" she had cried, and had made a foolish plunge across the bed toward the telephone. Roy had seized her wrist, sending the telephone crashing.

"Now look what you've done!" Chris had shouted at him. She had set the cracked plastic box back on the table. "The dial's all bent. Suppose no one can ring us up? It must work, it's part of the plan."

"It's all right," Roy had said. "Even if we can't dial, it will ring."

"We won't chance it. We'll wait by the one in the hall."

In the kitchen, while Meg watched them eat lunch, she wondered if Chris would remember that Thursday was Gregory's afternoon. She need not have worried. As if answering Meg's thoughts, Chris said, "Hurry up, Roy. The gardener will be here at two. I'll tell Gregory that you're ill in bed, Meg."

Later, in the hall, where Chris had installed them, Meg wondered if Chris would remember Gregory's tea. If he did not find it waiting on the kitchen table at half past three he might come to look for Chris. But at twenty minutes past three Chris said, "I suppose I must get that old nuisance his tea. Roy, keep a good watch on Meg—she might try to call out to him."

At half past four the telephone rang. Chris rushed to answer it. "Hullo. No, I'm afraid you can't. Mrs. Starr has the flu. . . . Can I give her a message? *Mr.* Dawlish! Why—is anything the matter?"

Chris grinned at Roy and listened again. "How awful! . . . At that sharp bend by the bridge? . . . Which hospital? I see. . . . You will be there all evening? Let me know if there's anything we can do. Yes, please ring again. Mrs. Starr will be ever so anxious."

Chris put the receiver down and looked at Roy. "The brake must have failed where we thought it would, and she couldn't take the bend, not with a lorry coming the other way. She's broken a leg and concussed herself. It went off just as we planned."

"You knew that there was going to be an accident," Meg cried. "What did you do?"

Chris said in her most offhand way, "I wheeled her bicycle into the garage while she was doing the larder. Then Roy nipped down and saw to the brake. I put the bicycle outside the back door again, and that was that. Simple, wasn't it?"

"But Chris—how could you do that to a good, harmless woman?" Meg must have made a threatening move toward Chris, because Roy pulled her back, holding both her arms above the elbows. All she could do was to cry, "You'll pay for this, both of you. I was sorry for you,

Chris, because you were young and in trouble—God help me! That's over. I know you now, and I won't let another chance go. You'll be punished, I promise you!"

"Let her go, Roy," Chris said, amused. "There's nothing she can do."

THE days passed with heavy, uneasy slowness. The house was divided by an invisible line across which Meg on one side, Chris and Roy on the other, waited warily, never able to relax. Meg no longer knew which day of the week it was, and yet Thursday could not have come around again because she had seen no sign of Gregory. As she stood at the sitting-room windows, she told herself that it would not be long now, that things were coming to a head.

The dull, sultry weather had not helped. Her mind felt heavy too; her head ached incessantly, perhaps because she was not eating enough. At breakfast today she had been allowed only a cup of coffee, although she had cooked a large dish of eggs and bacon for Roy.

There was plenty of food in the house now—Chris had telephoned the grocer and the butcher. It had added to Meg's sense of helplessness to know that the house, far from being cut off, was visited regularly by the butcher's boy, the grocer, the postman, the milkman, and the laundryman, all able-bodied human beings who might have been in another world. Chris still bicycled to the village to fetch the papers.

Chris was like a little whip, apparently finding relief from the strain of long days in harrying her prisoner. She refused to let Meg change her clothes, insisting every morning that she put on the same slacks and shirt. Meg was made to cook three meals a day but was not allowed to clean the house, though Chris knew how much the growing unkemptness distressed her. When Meg, to soothe her nerves, had worked at the needlepoint footstool cover she was making for Rosa, Chris had taken it away.

Roy sometimes came to Meg's aid, telling Chris to leave her alone, but only to provoke Chris. It amused him to make Chris lash out at him. Their short quarrels usually ended in lovemaking—but not always. Last night, when the television had "gone on the blink," as Roy said, they had quarreled bitterly and Roy had flung out of the room.

At breakfast, Meg had wondered why they were so silent and preoccupied. Had something occurred in the night or early morning to

worry them? Had they heard bad news on the radio, or not heard the news at all? Yesterday Roy had been upset because the transistor's batteries were giving out. Chris had scolded Meg. "There's not one radio in this house, not even in the car. Prehistoric, that's what you are."

Breakfast had been earlier than usual that morning—and why had Chris put on a dress and taken pains with her hair? Chris had muttered something to Roy about batteries and making a list of what they would need. Why had Meg not paid more attention?

She and Roy were in the living room when Chris hurried in, carrying a shopping basket. She led Meg to the writing desk. "Your checkbook's in the drawer," she said. "Get it out, and some notepaper. We need money. Write a check for a hundred pounds for cash."

"The bank wouldn't cash such a big check for you."

"They will when I give them the note you're going to write to the manager. Tell him that you've been ill and are going away for a short holiday, and will he please give a hundred pounds in one-pound notes to your friend Miss Chris Standford. Hurry up—I must catch the bus and be back here before one."

Meg did as she was told. "Well, I'm off now, Roy," Chris said. "Keep your eyes skinned and don't trust her an inch."

Roy said nothing, only gave a small, despairing shrug and, as the door closed, flung himself down in a chair with his back to Meg.

Meg understood his despair. It was only ten o'clock, and there was another interminable morning to be lived through. She kept still; any movement might remind Roy that she was still sitting at the writing desk, out of his sight, where anyone in the side garden could see her. Only yesterday, standing by this window, she had seen Felix under the apple trees, gazing toward the house. Meg had lifted her hand to attract his attention. Chris had been beside her at once, talking and laughing in the most natural way while she propelled her back into the room. Chris had been furious, but then had said that perhaps it was good that "the old snooper" had seen Meg alive and well.

Now, as she peered toward the apple trees, Meg realized that she was still holding her little gold pen. On the blotter in front of her, with her checkbook and a letter from Rosa, was some writing paper. Here was her chance to write a plea for help. She would fold the paper into a small square, and if Felix showed himself in the orchard again, she

would try to throw it out of the window. If he did not, she would hide it about her and wait, perhaps until Gregory came.

As Meg pulled the paper toward her, Roy's voice made her start. "You're too near the window. Move over here where I can see you."

"Move yourself. I'm staying here."

It was the first time that Meg had defied either of them, and she wondered what he would do. She scrawled shakily: "Margaret Starr prisoner help danger man armed."

She heard Roy push his chair back and, looking around, saw that he was crossing to the sofa, from where he would be able to see the whole room. As he stretched out at full length and arranged the cushions under his head, she folded the paper and slipped it under the band of her slacks. Then, turning in her chair, she watched Roy from under her eyelashes as she pretended to read Rosa's letter.

Roy began trimming his nails with his knife; Meg knew that the knife was to remind her that he was on guard. Today he wore a green silk shirt of Meg's and her blue rose-patterned silk scarf tied like a cravat around his neck. A gold chain and locket, left to her by an aunt, hung low on his bare, hairless chest. The general effect, with his white face and long hair, was, she had to admit, strangely elegant, if bizarre. Roy was as vain as the proverbial peacock. Chris, by contrast, hardly varied her old jeans and shirt, her bare feet thrust into sandals.

The reason they kept Meg always with them in the daytime, instead of tying her up in the dressing room as they did at night, was the need to produce her at a moment's notice if anyone insisted on seeing her. And indeed, in these last days, three people had arrived at the house determined to talk to her. Having been left so much alone by her neighbors for the last six months, Meg wondered whether some mysterious village grapevine had been operating.

Two had come on the same day: the vicar in the afternoon and Mrs. Jensen in the evening. The vicar had been a match for Chris when the girl met him at the front door, assuring her that he had called because he had heard that Mrs. Starr was ill. He had been shown into the sitting room, where Meg had tried to talk naturally to him and not to look at the study door behind which Roy was hidden. But the vicar must have sensed the tenseness in the atmosphere because he did not stay long.

A few hours later the front-door bell had rung again. "Now what?"

Chris had exclaimed, and run to peer out of a window. "Quick! It's that Jensen woman again." Roy had been pushed into the study and Meg had been told to wait in the sitting room.

From where she stood, praying that Mrs. Jensen would go away, she could see Roy behind the half-open study door, pointing the gun directly at her. It was then that she had known with complete certainty that the moment would come when he would pull the trigger. Not now! she had prayed, as the voices in the hall came nearer.

The energetic Mrs. Jensen, with Chris at her heels, had sailed into the room—even Chris had not been able to oppose her. "It's that money for the village hall," Chris had said, scowling at Meg behind Mrs. Jensen's back. "We—you forgot it."

Even when Chris had given her the money, the wretched woman had made no move to go but, after raising her eyebrows at the room's dusty dishevelment, had settled herself down on the sofa as if for a long talk. While Chris had stared resentfully at her tailored linen dress, careful makeup, and bright red hair, Mrs. Jensen had been advising Meg that the best tonic after a bout of flu was a visit to the hairdresser and a general smartening up. Then Chris had been instructed that the least she could do, after all Mrs. Starr's kindness, was not only to look after her but the house as well, to try to take poor Mrs. Dawlish's place.

Mrs. Jensen, it seemed, had been to see Mrs. Dawlish in the hospital and had found her as well as could be expected, but hurt that Meg had not been to see her. At this Chris had interrupted rudely, saying that the silly woman should realize that Margaret was still unwell, that they had sent her flowers and grapes and what more could anyone expect?

When at last Mrs. Jensen had left, Chris had said, "The interfering nosey bitch. I'm sure she guessed something was up."

These two visitations, coming so close together, had upset Chris. Had she sensed that the tide was turning, that the house was not as safe as it had been? Then, after Mr. Dawlish had come, the day before yesterday, Roy had been more than upset and Chris had found it difficult to calm him.

Mr. Dawlish had knocked at the back door while Meg was cooking the evening meal, and had insisted on seeing her. Obviously he had been sent by Mrs. Dawlish to make sure that she was being properly looked after. Chris, having hidden Roy in the larder, had shown Mr.



Dawlish into the kitchen and there he had stayed, sitting at the table opposite Meg. He had seemed so reassuringly normal that Meg had been tempted to take a chance, but the gun had deterred her. The very thought of its squat, evil black shape in Roy's hand had kept her assuring Mr. Dawlish that Chris was spoiling her. When at last she had watched Chris follow his stocky, dependable figure out, it had seemed that her last hope had gone, and she had hidden her face in her hands to hide her tears.

Roy had crossed the room to put the gun down on the table before pulling out a chair. "I've had enough of this!" he shouted. "I'm getting out!" At once Chris had begun to plead, but it had seemed to Meg that there was a new note of uncertainty in her voice.

Now, sitting at her desk, Meg glanced toward Roy. He was apparently deep in thought, his arms crossed behind his head, the gun on the sofa beside him. She looked with longing at the garden. The sun was shining for the first time in days. Was this a good omen?

She had not moved, and yet Roy was on his feet and coming toward her, tucking the gun into the red scarf which was tied like a broad sash around his waist. She looked up at him apprehensively, but all he said was, "Have you got any maps?"

Meg pointed to the bottom drawer of the desk.

Pulling the drawer right out and spilling its contents onto the carpet, Roy knelt and opened the maps one by one until he found what he wanted—a large scale road map of the British Isles. It was out of date now, Meg suspected.

He glanced up at her and frowned. "Give me that pen and something to write on," he said. "Don't you sit watching me. Get over there and keep quiet." His eyes were bloodshot and threatening.

She put her gold pen and some paper into his outstretched hand, walked away, and sat down on the sofa.

Roy muttered to himself as he studied the map. He was working out a route, that was obvious, jotting down place names or road numbers on the paper. For the first time since Meg had known him he looked happy, absorbed in what he was doing. Shutting her eyes, she saw him straddling a motorbike, his set face showing a grim delight in the shattering roar and his body leaning at a perilous angle, this way and that, as the road twisted and turned before him.

"You asleep?" she heard Roy saying. "I've asked you twice if you've got another map; this one doesn't show the new motorways."

Meg roused herself. "There may be a more up-to-date one in the study, in my husband's desk." Without thinking of what she was saying, she added, "Shall I go and see?"

He did not answer at once. His back to her, he seemed to be adding up figures. Without turning his head he said, "Yes, you'd better."

Meg reached the half-open study door before she realized what those words could mean to both of them. She ran across the study's thick carpet and out into the hall. It was difficult to ease back the bolt of the front door slowly and silently. Her hands were shaking, her heart pounding, but at last she was out—standing on the step in the dazzling sunshine, breathing warm, scented air. She had escaped.

As she fled across the narrow lawn, making for the archway in the beech hedge where Chris had first hidden and watched her walking toward the waiting taxi, she heard Roy's shout.

7

THE beech leaves made a thick screen; Meg could not see through them. She peered out toward the archway in time to see Roy rush along the path to the gate, as she had known he would. He hesitated as he looked down the lane from left to right. Suddenly he crouched behind the gate, and she too heard the approaching car. . . .

If only she had run straight out into the lane, she could have stopped the car and been safe. But in those few seconds on the front step she had decided that her best chance of reaching Felix Palmer's bungalow was through the wood. When the car did not stop, Roy would surely guess that she was making for the bungalow. Would he come this way, or run back through the house and into the orchard?

Abandoning the hedge, Meg ran across the side garden, expecting at every step to hear Roy behind her, and dived into the shrubbery that screened the garden from the lane. On hands and knees, she wriggled between the bushes until she was safely hidden. Looking up, she saw wild currant flowers, bright pink against the blue sky. Could she, Margaret Starr, really be crouching in her own garden like a hunted animal? She saw herself, hot, disheveled, ridiculous, with her hair full

of twigs and leaves. But she forced herself to stay where she was.

Roy would be desperate to find her before Chris came back. He would have to prevent her from reaching the bungalow; at the same time, he could not risk being seen by Felix or anyone else. Meg and Roy were embarked on a frenzied game of hide-and-seek.

With its many hedges, trees, and bushes, this was an ideal garden for such a game, and Meg knew its plan better than Roy did. In front of her lay the lawn of the side garden, edged to her right by a long herbaceous border and a tall yew hedge. Between the hedge and the wood was a strip of mowed grass, then a ditch and a fence. Two planks and a stile crossed ditch and fence where the hedge ended. Somehow she must cross that stile into the wood; it was the only way for her to reach the lane without being seen. At her back, between the shrubbery and the fence, was a derelict potting shed. She must find some other hiding place. If only she knew where Roy was.

Meg did not know why she was compelled at that moment to turn her head and peer between the thinning bushes behind her. Roy was standing near the old shed; she could see the emerald of the silk shirt. Surely he must see her too. But he moved out of sight, and she heard a loud creak as he pulled the shed door open. Silence—then a twig snapped, somewhere close. He was going away, down the path. The safest place for her might be the shed which he had just searched—or should she double back into the house and try to reach the telephone?

As Meg tried to make up her mind what to do, she glimpsed him running across the grass in front of her, making for the archway again. Now was her chance to reach the wood. . . . She forced a way out of the bushes, ran down the path, then dodged around the end of the herbaceous border and behind the yew hedge. As she raced toward the ditch, she remembered that the planks always rattled, and forced herself to cross them with care. She scrambled over the stile, not daring to look back. Then she was in the wood's confusing light and shade, avoiding the clutching brambles, until she was leaning against an oak tree, hidden at least from the house, and trying to get her breath.

It was silent in the wood, and warm. In a few moments she would have to try to reach the trees edging Felix's lawn. He would surely be in his garden on such a fine day.

She was reluctant to leave the shelter of the broad oak trunk,

although, a few yards away, a thicket of young trees and bushes offered a better screen. As she hesitated, she was aware that the silence was a delusion; the wood was full of rustlings and furtive movements. Then she heard another sound. Someone had walked over the planks.

It was too late to move. Roy was walking down the path to her right, with no attempt at quietness or concealment. He had shed the silk shirt and was naked to the waist; his bare shoulders gleamed as the leaf-filtered sunlight caught them. Then he was out of sight, although she could still hear him, beating at the bushes with a stick.

The silence, when she could not hear him anymore, was even more unnerving. He must have reached the end of the path where it joined the lane. Did he recognize the gap through which, with Chris's help, he had pushed the motorbike? Perhaps he was standing where they must have stood above the pond, looking across Felix's lawn to the bungalow. Or perhaps he had sensed where she was hiding and, moving stealthily now, was making his way back toward her. As this unwelcome thought came into her mind, she heard him again. He was forcing a way through the thick undergrowth along the edge of the wood toward the orchard. There was no way out there; he would have to circle back to the stile, passing close to her tree.

Before she realized that she had moved, Meg found herself going quietly along the path and through the gap in the fence, onto the lane. Her whole being was concentrated on the bungalow. The hawthorn hedge that bordered Felix's property was not high enough to shield her completely, so she crept along the grass bank to his gate. She clicked the latch and, knowing that Roy, if he were watching from the trees, could now see her, rushed up the path.

The windows watched her headlong approach with what seemed a stare of glassy surprise. The green lawn, freshly mowed and empty, stretched to the pond and the wood. The silence should have warned her, and, as she ran up the steps into the porch, she did wonder where the dachshunds had gone.

The front door was locked.

At first Meg could not believe it and wasted time pushing at the door. It was only when she saw the empty garage that she realized Felix, on this day of all days, had taken his car and dogs and gone out.

The shock was almost too much. Meg sank down on the front step,

unnerved again and trembling, not knowing what to do. The thought of Roy brought her to her feet. Should she try to break a window and reach the telephone? The sound of breaking glass would tell Roy where she was—if he did not know it already. It was then that she remembered her scrawled message, which was still tucked into the band of her slacks. She pushed it through the letter slot in the front door.

Meg thought of the farm at the end of the lane. Although it seemed impossibly far away, it was her only hope. She crept along the side of the bungalow. As she passed the first window, she knew that Roy was behind her. He made no sound, but every muscle and nerve in her body knew that he was there.

Her scream tore across the sunny stillness of the day. Then her shoulder was seized in a painful grip and Roy's hand was over her mouth. She tried to struggle, bite, kick out at him, but was propelled around the corner of the bungalow. On the back path he released her, only keeping hold of her arm. Through tears of misery she saw his scowling face.

"Another squeal out of you and you'll cop it." His voice was hoarse and the hand on her arm was trembling. As he hurried her over the grass toward her house, he said, "Thought you'd been smart, didn't you? Got me worried? You wouldn't have got away with it, you know. Good luck for the old fool that he was out."

The words were said quietly, but they were like a blow. For the first time Meg realized what her headlong dash to Felix might have meant. What chance would a small elderly man have had against this armed young thug? Every move she made to escape would mean, as long as Roy had the gun, that she was putting some innocent person in danger. At that thought, the last remnants of fight went out of her.

The house was dark and chill after the glare of the open lawn, a prison closing around her again. They went to the kitchen, where Roy told her to fetch beer from the refrigerator. Then they were in the sitting room, Meg on the sofa, Roy in the wing chair opposite her. But for the beer bottles and glasses on the table, they might never have left the room. The maps lay where Roy had left them on the carpet.

He leaned back, crossing his long legs, and to Meg's surprise made an attempt at a smile. He said, as if they were not enemies but fellow conspirators, "No need for Chris to know, is there?"

IT WAS A QUARTER to one before Chris came back. Roy heard her before Meg did and sat up. His hands gripped the chair arms.

She burst into the room, looking hot and disturbed. Throwing a newspaper down on the sofa, she cried, "Where's the transistor? I've got the batteries. There's a bit in the paper, but only what we heard this morning. Quick! It's nearly one."

The small green box was beside Roy's chair. Chris lifted it to his knees, then sat back on her heels, impatiently watching Roy's fumbling hands. When at last the pleasant, even voice flowed into the room, telling of earthquakes, accidents, strikes, Meg found that even she was leaning forward. Then the voice said:

"The two youths who have been assisting the police in their inquiry into the death of Police Constable P. G. Baines, who was run down by a van in South London some weeks ago, were charged this morning with burglary and theft. Following information received, the police are seeking the driver of the van, believed to be Roy Halloran, and a girl who may be with him. Description of Halloran. Aged about eighteen, tall, well-built, long-haired, light-eyed. When last seen he was wearing jeans and a black leather jacket. Anyone recognizing this description is asked to contact his nearest police station."

Chris seized the transistor from Roy and turned it off. They stared at each other without speaking. Then Chris said, "'Information received'—I like that! It was that Mick. Trying to save his own skin."

Roy lifted his head. "Mick wouldn't—he was my mate. It must have been Johnnie."

"Mick or Johnnie, what does it matter? The two of them could stay on in the trailer, get up to work next morning at the construction site as if nothing had happened; but Mick said you had to take your bike and go. And you heard what he said to me—that I was a jinx, that the three of you were doing all right until I came along."

Roy stared around the room. "Well, I didn't want to take you along. You nagged me into it. Mick was livid when he found you in the van."

"He let me stay."

"What else could he do then? I tell you, Mick's all right. He said he'd get in touch when the heat was off, he said he'd settle with the boss, see there was no trouble, send my card and wages on, and my share."

Chris scrambled to her feet and stared down at him. "Your share!

They gave you the transistor to keep you quiet. There was silver and clocks in the bag—I saw them. 'Keep in touch,' he said. 'Look in the personal column of *The Times*,' he said. We looked, didn't we?"

Roy leaned forward in his chair, his eyes looking anywhere except at Chris. "It must have been Johnnie," he said. "He was always short and he must have tried to sell a clock or something, and they got on to him and Mick. When he saw a murder rap coming up, he squealed."

"So that's it," said Meg slowly. "This boy that you would follow anywhere has killed someone—killed! It was in the papers at the time. Felix tried to tell me and I wouldn't listen—"

"It was an accident, do you hear?" Chris said loudly. "I was there. I ought to know. This copper came along when Roy and I were waiting near the corner in the van, where we'd been told."

Meg looked searchingly into the girl's face. "You're lying. I know that voice."

"I'm not lying. What would be the use now?"

"Very well. You were waiting in this van—what for?"

"The others were in a house a few yards away, back down the road. The house was empty, the people on holiday, or so Mick thought. Mick always did the planning, and Roy was the one that found a car or van. This one he'd pinched from a parking lot. . . ."

Roy jumped up. "Can't you keep your mouth shut?"

"Meg's got to know how it was, not believe all those lies, so she'll help us."

Meg stared at Chris, unable to believe her ears. "Help you? Do you think I would help you after this week, after Mrs. Dawlish?"

"You will when you know. You must, there's no one else. Mick said that even if it was only manslaughter, Roy could be put inside for ten years. He couldn't stand that." Chris put an urgent hand on Meg's arm. "Listen, Meg, at least listen. It was the first time they'd tried a house and Roy was as nervous as a cat, and I was trying to josh him along. We hadn't been parked long when this copper taps at the window—my side it was. He flashed a light on us and asked what we were doing there. I told him couldn't he see me and my boy friend were saying good night? Well, he grinned and said to make it short, that he'd be back, and if we were still there, there'd be trouble. Then off he went, round the corner into the side street."

Chris paused and looked earnestly into Meg's face, as if hoping to see some encouragement. "Well, after a minute Roy started the engine, and then Mick and Johnnie came rushing out of the house. The lights went on and a man in night things came after them—Mick had got the wrong house. If that wasn't enough, there were two people coming up the road, and as Mick and Johnnie bundled into the back of the van and we got moving, they ran after us. Mick shouted to turn into the side street because it was a shortcut. I yelled, 'No, the copper'll see us,' but Roy did like Mick said, as he always did. Roy put the headlights on, and there was the copper running back toward us, having heard the noise, I suppose. He held his arms out to stop us, and Roy braked. Mick said to keep on, that the cop'd jump back. . . ."

Chris stopped and looked at Meg again, but Meg turned away and said, "Of course the wretched man would have jumped back, or tried to. What really happened, Chris?"

"He didn't! I tell you he just stood there, asking for it."

Pushing Chris's hand away, Meg said, "Did you stop to see what you had done?"

"How could we? They were coming after us down the road, shouting. Mick said a patrol car would soon be after us and that we must ditch the van. So we left it in another parking lot and walked back to the trailer. Roy's bike was parked there and—"

"Trailer?" Meg said. "I don't understand."

"The three of them lived in a trailer behind the construction site; there were dozens there for the workmen. The construction was a huge office building outside London, not so far from my dad's place. Mick and Roy had teamed up a year ago, and they moved from one job to another, but they planned to stay with this one until it was finished. Roy was earning nearly forty quid a week."

Meg nodded, and Chris went on. "Roy kept saying, 'We killed him, Mick,' until Mick yelled, '*You* killed him, you bloody clot, you were driving.' When I told Mick about the copper taking a good look at Roy and me, he said that we'd better pray hard the copper *had* died—before he could talk. We didn't know for sure until we read it in the papers, here in this house."

Chris glanced around at Roy, who was standing, shoulders hunched, with his back to them, and said, "We went back to my place. I went

into the shop to the till—we had to have some money. When we got up here, Roy had the jitters—thought a patrol car was after us, which was why we turned off the main road, and why we went into a ditch. When the bike ran out of petrol and we pushed it up that hill I told him not to worry, that the copper must of died at once. We went right over him—I felt it."

Roy swung around. His face was livid under its film of sweat. "What does it matter now? All that matters is to get out of here quick."

Chris put her hand on his. "Now, don't panic. No one knows where you are."

"The radio said that about a girl being with me. Lots of people know you're here. Johnnie must have described you, too."

"There was no description of me on the radio or in the newspapers." Chris frowned. "All the same, it's a nuisance. Old Palmer knows about me. He found the bike and he's sure that I pinched the gun. If he heard the news like we did . . ." She looked toward the window, as if she expected to see Felix coming across the lawn.

"He's not there," Roy said. "He's gone out in his car. The place is all locked up."

"How do you know? You've been outside? You let her get away? Oh Roy!" Chris turned on Meg, her eyes cold, all pretense of helplessness gone. "I should have seen at once what a mess you're in. Been playing hide-and-seek in the bushes? Thought you'd given Roy the slip?"

Meg thought that Chris was going to hit her, as the girl had done once before, but Chris shrugged. "It doesn't matter now. We've other things to worry about."

"Well," Roy said, "we've got the money and the car. Let's go."

He moved toward the hall, but Chris darted in front of him. "Wait, Roy," she pleaded. "We've got to make a plan."

"You and your plans. Much good they've done us." Never before had Meg heard him speak to Chris in such a bitter tone.

"How can you say that?" Chris flared out at him. "If it wasn't for me, I'd like to know where you'd be now."

"If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here at all."

"You were glad enough that I found you somewhere to lie up in when your ankle was bad. You've been safe, everything laid on, and all for free. You've been lucky, and you know it."

Roy turned away from her. "Luck can run out," he said. "Aw, come on, Chris, let's go." It was a plea, not a command.

Putting her arm around Roy, Chris said, "If anyone saw you driving Meg's car they would think it odd. We'll go when it's safe, round half past five or six, when they'll all be indoors at their teas. Now we'd better eat, and then we'll pack the car—food, blankets, clothes. We'll make it look as if Meg and me had shut the house up and gone away for a few days' holiday. Meg must write notes for the milkman and Gregory, and a few lines to Mrs. Dawlish saying that, as she isn't quite well yet, we're going away for a change of air."

Roy looked down at Chris's flushed, confident face. "What about her?" he said slowly. "Once we're off, she'd set the police after us."

"She won't do anything. We'll see to that."

Chris's arm was still around the boy as, together, they turned to face Meg. She had met that cold dual look before. In the warmth of the sun-filled room she shivered. Why had she never thought about what would happen to her when at last they went away? "What are you going to do, Chris?" she asked.

Chris laughed. "Look at her!" she said. "She's terrified. Poor old Meg—what do you think we're going to do?"

8

MEG's little gold carriage clock lay on the hearthrug at her feet; one glass panel was cracked, but, miraculously, it was still going. A few minutes ago it had struck five. From where Meg sat in a chair by the fireplace, her ankles and hands tied to it with silk scarves, she could see the clock's minute hand moving. It was better to keep her eyes on that than to look at what they had done to the sitting room.

The senseless destruction had begun immediately after lunch. They had eaten in the kitchen, where Chris had been careful to draw the curtains—she had not only remembered that the laundry was overdue, but that it was more than a week since the lawns had been mowed; Lawns Ltd.'s yellow van, complete with mowers and at least two men, might drive up to the back gate at any time.

During the meal both Chris and Roy had been tense and preoccupied. When Meg began to clear the table, Chris had told her to leave

it alone—they wouldn't need it anymore. That had set Roy off. He had jumped up, laughing and shouting, "We're going, going!" Seizing the tablecloth, he had sent everything on it crashing to the floor, then danced Chris around the room over the broken china.

At first Chris had not responded to his sudden change of mood, but when he began to hurl the plates on the sideboard to the floor, making a din that could have been heard in the lane, she had given in. It was Chris who had run upstairs to fetch the scarves, and Chris who had held Meg down on the chair in the sitting room, warning her not to cry out. "Roy could get rough, he's in the mood."

But Roy had not meant to break the clock; it had slipped from his hands when he and Chris were collecting the small ornaments from the mantelpiece—Meg's jade horse, the gold-and-tortoiseshell snuffbox, the ivory fan. These, with other objects that they had thought of value, had been put in the bag in which Meg kept her embroidery wool.

In misery, Meg had watched as Roy kicked over the desk, smashed furniture, and hurled pictures to the ground. Chris had laughed and run to join him, giving her attention to the china in the corner cupboard. When the room was in ruins, they had stood panting and laughing together. "Feeling better now?" Chris had asked Roy. "Come on, let's pack."

When they had gone upstairs, Meg sat slumped in the chair. To her generation, and the generations behind her, things—one's own belongings, humble or beautiful—were considered worthy of being cherished, guarded, kept whole for as long as possible. Why then this new urge in the world, in so many of the young, to smash, deface, defile?

A loud crash overhead followed by a yell of laughter brought her to herself. It sounded as if they were passing the time by wrecking the upstairs rooms. She prayed that they would not leave before six. The longer they stayed, the better for her. Surely Felix must come home before six and find her fold of paper? If he did not come, what would they do to her?

Meg heard them on the stairs and braced herself, thinking that they were coming for her. But they crossed the hall together, not even glancing in her direction. Roy was carrying two suitcases, Chris a large bundle. Chris took everything out to the car. Meg could hear Roy moving uneasily as he waited in the hall for Chris to come back. She

glimpsed them again as they went toward the kitchen and returned carrying baskets of groceries. Then they went back upstairs.

After what seemed a lifetime they came down again, and into the sitting room. They had spent some time changing their clothes and now looked almost self-consciously neat and clean, as if they were setting off on a holiday. Chris had made up her face and eyes, was wearing her linen shirt and slacks and carrying a cardigan and bag. But Roy, in a white open-collared shirt, with a spotted scarf carefully folded in the neck, a tweed jacket belonging to Philip, and Meg's dark glasses covering his light eyes, was transformed. Meg saw that he still wore the red sash, from which the gun butt protruded.

"He looks quite different, doesn't he?" Chris asked. She regarded him searchingly. "But not different enough. I know, Roy—your hair!" She went to the overturned desk and came back with Meg's scissors.

"You leave my hair alone," Roy said. "Anyway, we're asking for trouble, hanging about like this."

"It won't take more than a few minutes," Chris said.

Roy gave in, as usual, and Meg watched Chris drape the white cardigan around his shoulders and set to work with the scissors.

When the hearthrug was covered with loose red-brown hair, Roy put his hands up to his head, feeling around the back of his neck. Chris laughed. "No need to look like that! There's plenty left." She twitched the cardigan from his shoulders, shook the hair from it, and said briskly, "Now we've only got to see to Meg and lock up the house."

She bustled about searching for a pen, paper, and envelopes, finding Meg's eyeglasses and her desk pad, and laying them all on her lap. She untied Meg's hands, jerking impatiently at the knots, hurting Meg.

"I can't write," Meg protested. "My fingers are numb."

"You must," said Chris. "The note to the milkman first. Then I'll put it outside the back door while you get on with the others."

When Meg had written the first note, Chris snatched it from her and, after giving her two more sheets of writing paper, dashed out of the room. She was back almost at once.

Meg was about to refuse to write another word, to throw the pen down and defy them, when Chris said, "Roy, where's your knife? Better get it out." Would they use it on her? Her flesh shrank at the thought of the cold steel. There was nothing she could do except take

as long as she dared over writing the few lines to Mrs. Dawlish and Gregory, and addressing the envelopes Chris gave her.

Chris took the letters and produced two stamps from her bag. "We'll post them on our way," she said and, bending down, untied the scarves that bound Meg's ankles to the chair legs. "Up you get." Chris put a hand under her arm and tried to haul her to her feet. Meg shrank away, struggling to release her arm, cowering back in the chair. "It's no use," Chris hissed at her. "You're going upstairs if we have to drag you."

The hall was cool after the close warmth of the sitting room, and the familiar chill revived Meg. As she was propelled toward the stairs, she caught a glimpse through the windows of the front lawns, green-gold in the late afternoon light, of the gate so impossibly far away.

When they reached the stairs, Meg wrenched herself free and, catching hold of the newel-post, hung on to it with both hands. "I'm not moving another step until you tell me what you are going to do."

She saw Roy look at Chris and then, to her surprise, move away to stand with his back to them. The dark glasses had hidden his eyes, but she was sure that there had been sudden doubt in that look. Chris's face, looking up at her, was as hard as stone, the eyes narrowed to blue slits. She looked like a small, venomous snake about to strike. "Very well, I'll tell you," she said. "We're going to put you in the attic, right at the end under that window where Roy was for so long. We're going to tie you up and gag you, then go away and leave you there."

It could not be true. Such things did not happen to ordinary people like her. Meg's head swam as she looked around the hall—she could not breathe. "No one will come," she said at last. "Not for weeks, perhaps for months. You've seen to that, haven't you?"

Chris darted an anxious look at Roy and said airily, "Oh, I expect someone will come along eventually, or you will manage to wriggle free before long. Come on now, up you go."

Clinging to the stair rail, Meg cried, "I promise not to go to the police. Take the car and go and I won't tell anyone."

"Do you think I'd fall for that?" Chris asked.

Meg tried to control her voice. "I might starve to death there, or die of thirst. Why don't you shoot me, if you mean to murder me?"

"Murder!" Chris's voice was shrill. "Don't take any notice of her, Roy. All we're going to do is to put you in the attic."

"You listen to me, Roy," Meg said, loudly and slowly, as if she were talking to someone who spoke another language. "You have killed a man already—you might get away with manslaughter for that. But if you kill me too, what do you think will happen to you?"

Roy turned around. Meg saw his pallor, his look of anguish. "She's right, Chris. I can't, not again. Come on, leave her there. Let's go."

He moved toward the front door, and Chris, giving Meg a blow that sent her back against the carved chest, rushed after him. "Don't listen to her, Roy—we've got to do it. I won't have you shut away."

Roy looked down at her with horror and repugnance. "Get away from me," he said. "I wish I'd never set eyes on you."

Chris did not flinch. "Roy," she said gently, "you don't mean that."

He backed away as Chris advanced, her hand held out toward him, as if she were convinced that it had only to touch him to calm this storm. They were oblivious of Meg now, but she could not move. She crouched against the chest, listening with sick, shocked attention.

Roy was shaking uncontrollably as the spate of words poured from him. "I've had more than enough of being pushed round by you. Think you're clever, don't you? It's your fault, the whole of it. Why did you have to take hold of the wheel like that? You didn't have to do it, but you did. It was you who killed him—you, not me—"

Chris's voice cut off the hoarse stream of words. "I knew you wouldn't, so I did it. He'd seen you. He would have known you again. I did it for you."

She flung her arms around Roy, but he pushed her roughly away. He pulled off the tweed jacket, dropped it and the dark glasses to the floor, and tore the scarf from his neck. As he crossed the hall in long strides and the front door crashed open, Chris sprang after him, only to stand on the front step, staring.

Meg could not remember going to the girl or holding the small rigid body, but she would never forget the scene before them. It was etched, unnaturally sharp and vivid, forever on her brain. Someone was mowing the lawn, a pleasant whirring sound. As Roy rushed down the path, his shirt white against the green lawn, the red scarf around his waist was the exact color of the roses. Halfway down the path he came to a sudden halt at the sight of the white car at the gate, its blue lamp winking, and a group of men, two of them in uniform.

The lane, it seemed to Meg, was crowded with parked cars. She saw the top of a royal-blue van and behind it a yellow truck. What fate had willed that the laundry as well as Lawn Ltd.'s men should choose this evening, of all evenings, to descend on the house? Roy spun around, and now she saw his white, desperate face, the light, blank eyes. The gun was in his hand, and Meg heard herself call out, "No! Oh no!" Beside her, Chris echoed her cry, struggled briefly in Meg's grasp, and stood still, as helpless and staring as Meg was.

As if she were witnessing a highly colored silent film, Meg saw Roy make for the archway into the side garden, to be confronted by Felix Palmer, holding out both arms as if to head off a runaway horse. Turning, Roy ran toward the back path, only to halt again. The laundryman, carrying a box on his shoulder, stood with several other men behind him, one holding a rake, all white-faced and staring.

Now Roy was on the path again, standing at the center of the ring of silent onlookers that hemmed him in, pointing the gun this way and that. No one threw himself to the ground or took cover. Roy moved toward the house, where, Meg realized, he might barricade himself into a room and put up a fight for a while. She held Chris more closely as he approached, but he swung around once more and, standing with his back to them, put the gun to his head.

The report, which Meg knew she had been waiting to hear for days, shocked her out of her trance. As the silent watchers sprang into life and converged on the path, Chris began to struggle and make horrible animal whimperings. It was all Meg could do to hold the girl. Then Felix was there, pushing them both into the hall and shutting the door.

9

THE portrait in its gold frame looked back at Meg; the small brown eyes were like those of the man sitting opposite. Meg turned her head a little reluctantly to Felix as he said, "So you're off—I envy you, following the sun and leaving the rest of us to winter."

"It's only the beginning of September," Meg said gently. "The sun is still here, for some time yet." And indeed the lawn, the trees, seen through the windows of his sitting room, were bathed in sunshine.

As Meg had sold her own car, Rosa had driven her over that morning

to say good-by to Felix and to thank him for all he had done. Rosa had refused to come in with her, saying, "I know when I'm not wanted," and when Meg protested, had said, "Sometimes you are extremely dense, Meg. Or is it that you refuse to see what you don't want to see?"

Meg glanced uneasily at Felix again, and at once his eyes slid away from her, but not before she had seen the expression in them. It was wrong of her, she knew, to feel annoyed. What she would have done without him in that terrible time, she did not know. She could remember little of the confusion and horror directly after Roy's death, the voices, the questions, the people crowding into the hall. Only one memory was clear: Chris's face before they took the girl away, stupid with shock, vacant, empty.

Meg had been ashamed of herself for breaking down. Until Rosa returned and carried her off to her house on the village green, Felix had taken her in, caring as little as she did for what anyone might say or think; had nursed her, fed her, protected her, as far as he could, from reporters and would-be helpful neighbors.

The vicar had been allowed in for a few minutes, and Mrs. Jensen, refusing to take no for an answer, had stayed for what seemed hours. "To think that all the time I was with you I was covered by a gun!" she had said. "I shall have something to talk about all of my life."

Above all, Meg would always be grateful to Felix for finding out what was happening to Chris. From him Meg had learned of that first night in the police station, where Chris's father had refused all responsibility; of the juvenile court next morning; of the remand home. Later, when Chris came up for trial with Mick and Johnnie, Felix had driven her and Rosa to the court.

"How can I thank you?" Meg began now.

But he waved this away and said rapidly, "Singapore I know well—you'll enjoy that, I should think. But I've never been to South Africa. Perhaps you'll settle there for good?"

"Oh no—I'll only be with Michael for a month. I must be back by the end of January. Chris's baby will be born the next month."

Meg saw his face redden, and he stood up. "Do you mean to say that after all that wretched girl did . . . Don't be a sentimental fool!"

"You don't understand. This unfortunate baby must have been conceived in my house."

He threw his hands up in a despairing gesture. "You're hopeless!"

Meg stood up and, as angry now as he was, said, "Hopeless? Without hope? That's just what I'm not." Tears that she could not stop came into her eyes, as they did so easily these days. She turned her back on Felix.

Then he said, all anger gone from his voice, "Sit down, my dear. Let's talk it over. We mustn't quarrel, not on this last day."

When Meg sat down again, he laid his handkerchief on her lap. She tried to smile.

"That's better," he said. "Now, do you want to adopt this infant, if you can? Surely you're not contemplating having anything more to do with Chris?"

"No, no. I doubt if I will ever see the baby. As for Chris, I tried to see her last week. But she refused to see me, as she refuses to talk to anyone. I have been told that no one can do anything with her. She won't speak and scarcely eats."

"She will get over it. Chris is tough."

"Will she? It seems to me that when Roy died life simply went out of her," Meg said. "I have been in touch with the prison and welfare authorities, you know. They are only too pleased that there is someone to take an interest in this coming child. It will be born in the local hospital—no child, it seems, is allowed to be born in a prison—and Chris will be allowed to keep the baby with her for six months."

"And then?"

"I shall arrange to have it adopted, that's all."

Felix said, "Don't forget that this will be the child of a girl who deliberately killed an innocent man, and of a boy who was a thief."

"I shall forget it if I can. Nothing should be held against a child. At least Chris saw to it that no one could say Roy killed the policeman. The only time she roused herself in court was when she insisted that it had been she who seized the wheel of the van—you heard her, didn't you? Those two, Mick and Johnnie, hadn't seen her do it. I wouldn't have told anyone, not when Roy was dead."

"Then you knew?" Felix said. "Did Chris tell you?"

Meg shook her head, unable to speak, remembering that scene in the hall and Roy's hoarse voice. "Poor Chris," she said at last.

"How can you say that?"

"I can, now. You see, I know that everything Chris did, all the evil, was done for that boy, for love."

"Love! Can you call it love?"

"Yes, and that's the saddest part." Getting up, Meg walked to the window. "Rosa said that she would pick me up in half an hour. We are going on to say good-by to Mrs. Dawlish. Yes, there's the car, by your gate."

Turning to Felix, Meg held out her hand. "Thank you for all you have done for me. You saw to everything. Both Philip and Michael offered to come, but there was no need. And thank you for all you did to tidy up my poor house."

He took her hand. "What are you going to do about the house? Sell it? Much of your furniture can be repaired."

"I know—Rosa is seeing to it. Philip doesn't want me to sell the house."

"Could you live in it again?"

She shook her head. "No—that would be impossible."

Felix sighed and released her hand, and together they moved toward the door. "But you'll come back to the village?"

"Yes, of course."

In the porch, she turned to him and said, "If you hadn't found my scrawl here on the mat and rung up the police as you did, I wonder what would have happened. Would Roy be alive now?"

He said gently, "Don't think about it anymore—it's finished."

Felix did not walk with her to the gate as Meg expected, or even say good-by, but, calling the dachshunds, turned abruptly and went back up the steps into the porch.

When Meg was in the car sitting beside Rosa, she glanced once at the bungalow, at its neat brown roof and carefully tended lawns. As the car passed the gate of her own house, she looked straight in front of her down the lane.



Jon Godden

Some four miles from the main road connecting London to Dover is the small village of Aldington. With its beautiful old church and picturesque pub, it is the epitome of peaceful, rural England. It is the village where Mrs. Starr might have lived, and where Jon Godden makes her home.

In fact, like her fictional creation, Miss Godden lives at the end of a remote lane, some distance from the community. As I drove up to the house, with its uneven old tiled roof, I visualized very easily that fine evening in May when Mrs. Starr arrived home in the station taxi and heard "the shrill insistent summons" of the telephone bell. . . .

No shocks awaited me, however. I was given the warmest of welcomes by Miss Godden, who is every bit as friendly and attractive as her heroine. Within minutes, I was settled in her drawing room, partaking of an English afternoon tea of shortbread and thin slices of brown bread and butter. The room (from which, on a clear day, you can see France) was charmingly furnished. In such relaxed surroundings, the author spoke easily about her latest novel.

"My cleaning lady gave me the idea," recalled Miss Godden. "She told me about a woman in a nearby village who had come home to find two young people in her bed. This set me thinking again about a novel I had long been wanting to write about young people, dealing sympathetically but realistically with their problems and with the reasons that drive them to violence."

A few weeks later there was another local event which confirmed her in her resolve. Two young thugs held up the postmistress in the next village at gunpoint. "It made me realize that the problems I was trying to write about were not only very real but very close at hand."

Unlike Mrs. Starr, Miss Godden does not live alone. The eldest

PHOTO BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

of four sisters, she shares the house with the youngest of them. Another sister lives in the same village, and the fourth one, Rumer Godden, lives only a few miles away in Rye.

The Goddens spent their childhood in Bengal, where their father worked for the steamer companies whose boats plied the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. "We were sent to school in England," Miss Godden told me, "but after all the excitement of India, we found it difficult to settle down. I never stayed long at any school, was never properly educated, and have often wondered if I would have written better novels, or not novels at all, if I had been."

At sixteen she went to art school. "It had always been understood that I was to be a painter and my sister Rumer a writer. I worked hard, meaning to become a teacher of art, but went out to India for what was to be a short holiday and married there.

"When my husband died after a year, I came back to Europe to study art in England and Paris, and then worked as a commercial artist in India. I married again in 1936 and lived for the next twenty-one years in Calcutta, where I first started to write seriously. A short story of mine was published just before World War Two, but during the war years, when I worked as a hospital nurse, there was no time for writing. My first novel, *The Bird Escaped*, was written when I spent a few months' sick leave in Kashmir with Rumer; it was published in 1947.

"After that, writing became necessary to me, but all my life I have allowed myself to be diverted by other interests: travel, reading, fishing, riding, and an absorbing interest in animals, tame and wild. My husband and I were divorced a few years ago and I now live here, surrounded by my sisters, constant reminders of my free, easy, and happy childhood."

Miss Godden has now published nine novels, including *The Seven Islands*, *Mrs. Panopoulis*, and *A Winter's Tale*. She has also written two books with Rumer Godden, a childhood autobiography called *Two Under the Indian Sun* and a book about life in India called *Shiva's Pigeons*. —N.D.B.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Page 2: *Peaceful Village*, oil painting on canvas (c. 1850) by an anonymous American artist, is from the Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch Collection.